

# STARS

University of Central Florida  
**STARS**

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-

---

2020

## Everybody Says Don't: An Examination of Works by Stephen Sondheim in High School Theatre Programs

Matthew Nash-Brown  
*University of Central Florida*



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020- by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Nash-Brown, Matthew, "Everybody Says Don't: An Examination of Works by Stephen Sondheim in High School Theatre Programs" (2020). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-*. 105.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/105>



EVERYBODY SAYS DON'T:  
AN EXAMINATION OF WORKS BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM  
IN HIGH SCHOOL THEATRE PROGRAMS

by

MATTHEW JAMES NASH-BROWN  
B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts & Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2020

Major Professor: Earl Weaver

© 2020 Matthew Nash-Brown

## ABSTRACT

The works of Stephen Sondheim are some of the most complex in the musical theatre canon. The storylines are often about adults in tumultuous relationships and the music contains indiscernible melodies and abnormal rhythms. These are works often difficult for even the most experienced performers, let alone any high school student.

As a high school theatre teacher, it is important my students are challenged and prepared to tackle any and all theatrical works. I have dissected a number of Sondheim's works in order to find ways to make them more accessible to high school students. While the characters and their experiences may be well beyond their high school years, these works are still relevant to them. Navigating this complicated material is one of the many ways I challenge my students, and in my thesis, I intend to explain how I guide them through this text and music.

I utilized research for my classroom teachings to explore three different works by Stephen Sondheim (*Into the Woods*, *Company*, and *Merrily We Roll Along*). Each of these musicals presents different challenges student performers must overcome. I used my musical theatre class as my lab to delve into in-depth script and score analysis and discussion of how to master the challenges of each musical into a full production.

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Tim Nash-Brown, and my son, Thayne Nash-Brown,  
whose constant patience has allowed me to focus on educating myself  
and growing in my profession.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge my program advisor, Earl Weaver, for all his guidance and support through the years. I would also like to thank my work partners, Sara Probst and Shannon Lyles, with whom none of these productions would have been possible. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my students of the past, present, and future, as they push me to be a better teacher every day, and without them, these shows would never have been possible.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: SCRIPT ANALYSIS .....	4
<i>Into The Woods</i> .....	4
<i>Company</i> .....	21
<i>Merrily We Roll Along</i> .....	36
CHAPTER 3: COMMON CHALLENGES.....	51
CHAPTER 4: <i>INTO THE WOODS</i> .....	66
CHAPTER 5: <i>COMPANY</i> .....	80
CHAPTER 6: <i>MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG</i> .....	96
CHAPTER 7: SUGGESTIONS .....	114
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION .....	123
REFERENCES .....	125

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When I was a junior in high school, my troupe attended the District Thespian Festival. The Group Musical<sup>1</sup> category was always the one to watch, and so I sat there to watch my friends compete. Shortly after my troupe performed, the troupe from Charles W. Flanagan High School got up to perform, each dressed in khakis and a brightly colored t-shirt, much like the gap commercials popular at the time. They performed “Company” from *Company* and won Critic’s Choice. While my troupe and I were incredibly jealous for not winning, the performance stuck with me. There was something about the song that intrigued me. I immediately went home and illegally downloaded the song on Napster or Limewire (whichever was working at the time), as well as “The Little Things You Do Together.” This was my first taste of the music of Stephen Sondheim, and I was hooked.

The next year, my senior year, our spring musical was *Into the Woods*, which prompted me to study one of Sondheim’s works further. I watched the video recording over and over, listened to the original Broadway cast recording on repeat, and learned all there was to know about the show. This musical was fun and interesting to me. The music was challenging: I listened to “Your Fault” on repeat until I could sing every character’s lines without flaw. I would also attend local high school productions of *Into the Woods* to compare and contrast theirs with ours. And though *Into the Woods* was only the tip of the iceberg, Sondheim had hooked me, a high school kid, on his work.

---

<sup>1</sup> This was before the category had been divided into Small Group Musical (3-7 performers) and Large Group Musical (8-16 performers).



I continued to study the works of Stephen Sondheim from then on; I still do. I love listening to the numerous cast recordings, as everyone gives their own special take on his music. There is so much to be learned from watching recordings of his productions. Yet, there are still works of his I am unfamiliar with. And while this sometimes embarrasses me, it also gives me so much excitement to study these works in the future. It will be a glorious experience when I finally get to sit down and read *Passion* or *Pacific Overtures* for the first time, listen to it, and watch it.

When I began teaching in 2011, I needed something to read with my beginning theatre students. I wanted something my students and I would enjoy reading and discussing together, so my mind wandered to what I enjoyed in high school, and I was brought back to my memories of *Into the Woods*. I studied the musical with all five of my beginning theatre classes that year and was impressed by the insightful discussions we had in every class. The conversations we had prompted me to want to further research this musical. Since then, it has become a staple in our Theatre Department musical theatre courses; sort of like a rite of passage that every beginning theatre student reads *Into the Woods*.

I am also amazed every year when I learn something new about this musical. Whenever I teach the show, a student will ask a question, which initiates a conversation about an aspect of the production I have never thought about. *This* is what I love about Stephen Sondheim's works: you can read, or listen, or watch them any number of times, and every time you are going to find or learn something new. His pieces are so well-developed; readers are constantly discovering new themes and connections. I have read a number of Sondheim's musicals with my classes over the years, and the inspired discussion which occurs is what every teacher hopes for. My high school students have always connected and been interested by Sondheim's works.

However, some scholars and educators deem Sondheim's works too challenging for high school performers. The vocal requirements alone may deter high school theatre directors. These musicals require vocalists with wide, mature vocal ranges, and high school students are often still finding their range. The chords and harmonies in his music are very advanced for any singer, let alone any high school student, as they can be extremely layered and intricate, or often contain dissonances which are just difficult to hear. His rhythms also can be extremely unpredictable, as Sondheim will often switch time signatures without warning, for sometimes one bar at a time, to draw attention to a certain word, or merely to have a lyric fit a certain way. This can give the young, untrained performer a lot of trouble if they do not know what they are looking for. These reasons alone may lead directors to shy away from Sondheim's works, especially without a knowledgeable music director on staff.

Some scholars and educators also may deem Sondheim's content too mature for high school audiences. The characters are sometimes double or triple the ages of high school students, so it is hard to believe a student would be able to connect with those characters or understand their life experience. These musicals also can have themes of a sexual nature, which some high school teachers or administration may not be comfortable with putting onstage. But there are ways to assist students in navigating these life experiences, as well as navigating the sexual content in a way which may be acceptable to your administration.

Though there are many reasons one might find works by Stephen Sondheim challenging, there is no reason why they should not be produced in high schools. Through my direction of three of Sondheim's works (*Into the Woods*, *Company*, and *Merrily We Roll Along*), I analyze what challenges to look for and how to overcome these challenges, so all high school students can feel the fulfillment of participating in a production of one of Sondheim's works successfully.

## CHAPTER 2: SCRIPT ANALYSIS

### *Into The Woods*

The story of *Into the Woods* intertwines all the fairytales we grew up knowing. There are numerous variations, as each region has taken these stories and adapted them to their culture. As *Into the Woods* begins, a narrator introduces us to three separate houses: Cinderella is busy doing chores in her home; Jack has his cow, Milky White, inside the house as he attempts to milk her; and the Baker and Baker's Wife are in their small cottage baking bread. They each announce their wishes: Cinderella wishes to attend the Prince's festival; Jack wishes his cow would give milk; and The Baker and his wife wish for a child.

Cinderella's Mother and Stepsisters enter and scoff at Cinderella for thinking she could attend the festival. The Stepmother makes a deal: she has emptied a pot of lentils in the fireplace and will allow Cinderella to attend the festival if she can pick them out in two hours. Cinderella calls upon her bird friends to assist her with her task. Upon completion, she shows the pot of lentils to her Stepmother; however, her Stepmother tells her she looks like a mess and there is no way she would let Cinderella attend the ball with them. So, Cinderella sits dejected, still wishing to attend the festival.

Meanwhile, Jack is still wishing his cow would produce milk, when his mother comes in alerting Jack that he must go into the woods to sell Milky White. She cites their lack of money and food as the reason he must sell his best friend.

While *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* represent German fairytales, The Baker and Baker's Wife do not have such an origin but were conceived as a sort of American-version of a fairytale. This pair also is at the center of the plot and are often the reason all these stories

convene. The Baker and Baker's Wife are first visited by Little Red Riding Hood, who would like to pick up some bread and sweets for her Granny who is sick in bed. Once Little Red Riding Hood leaves, the Witch from next door stops in and informs the two a curse was placed on their house, many years ago. The Witch explains the story of Rapunzel: The Baker's father and mother were with child, and The Baker's mother was very hungry, so his father snuck into the Witch's garden and stole some vegetables for her to eat. The Witch caught him and said he could have all the greens he desired, but the Witch would take the unborn child. But what The Witch did not know was he had also stolen beans from her garden. The Witch's mother had previously told her she would be punished if she ever lost any of the beans, and so the Witch was cursed with age and ugliness. Then, because The Witch had been cursed, she too placed a curse on the Baker's family: their family tree would be barren. But, the Witch was going to help them lift the curse, if the Baker and his wife were able to obtain four ingredients for a potion: the cow as white as milk, the cape as red as blood, hair as yellow as corn, and a slipper as pure as gold. They were given three midnights in which to obtain these ingredients.

As they are preparing to head into the woods, the Baker finds six beans in his father's hunting jacket, which they presume to be the Witch's beans. It is at this point the Baker insists the Baker's Wife stay home and not make the journey with him, as the woods can be a scary place. The prologue concludes as all of the characters enter the woods: Cinderella is heading into the woods to visit the grave of her mother in hopes she may be able to help her get to the ball; Jack is on his way to sell his cow; the Baker is on a search to find the four ingredients; and Little Red Riding Hood is on her way to visit her grandmother who is sick in bed.

The audience has been introduced to the majority of the main characters at this point. Each character establishes what they wish for, which represents the basic human instinct to want

for something. As we move into the woods, we get to see what each character is willing to do to get their wish, as well as whether they succeed or fail in getting their wish.

Cinderella quickly gets to the grave of her mother, which is a large tree encapsulating Cinderella's Mother's spirit. She asks the tree for silver and gold and receives a silver and gold gown, as well as gold slippers to wear to the festival, and with that, Cinderella is on her way to the festival. Shortly afterwards, the Wolf comes upon Little Red Riding Hood. He asks where she is headed and persuades her to collect some flowers off the path for her Granny. Amidst this song, he switches between coaxing her to stray from the path and also giving the audience insight into his inner dialogue. He conjures up thoughts of how delicious it will be to devour Granny first, and then Little Red Riding Hood, describing them in detail. Between the stage directions, text, and actor's performance, this song gives a very lascivious feeling, and many view the Wolf as a sexual predator. Once he has persuaded Little Red Riding Hood to stray from the path, he quickly makes his way to Granny's to eat her, before fooling Little Red Riding Hood.

In another part of the woods, The Baker's Wife has not stayed home, and once meeting up with The Baker, they persuade Jack to sell his cow as white as milk for just five magic beans, leaving one to keep for themselves. Jack says a tearful goodbye with the only song Sondheim has ever written with no rhyme in it, "Goodbye, Old Pal." This song has no rhyme in it because Jack is simply too dumb to rhyme. After collecting the first item, the Baker angrily directs the wife to head home with the cow. The couple creates a very polarizing opinion here: The Baker is insistent on getting this child the "right way" and does not intend to lie, cheat, or deceive to get any of the items. The Baker's Wife, on the other hand, is willing to do whatever it takes to get this child. Further along his way, the Baker meets Little Red Riding Hood, and, noting she

possesses the cape as red as blood, nicely asks her for it. She denies, and the Baker attempts to steal the cape. When Little Red Riding Hood bawls at the loss of her security blanket, the Baker feels bad and returns it. However, he finds resolve and plans to work harder to get these items, potentially willing to be a little more like the Baker's Wife.

Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her Granny's house, and the Wolf is in Granny's bed, disguised as her Granny. Shortly after the Wolf has eaten Little Red Riding Hood, The Baker comes upon the house and notices the girl's cape in the corner of the Wolf's mouth as he sleeps. Realizing the Wolf has swallowed Little Red Riding Hood, he cuts open the Wolf's stomach, releasing both Little Red Riding Hood and Granny. Little Red Riding Hood then sings the first of four reflection songs in this show. I describe a reflection song in the context of this show as a song which comes when a character is through with their journey. They usually describe their journey, how they felt, and what they have learned from this journey. During "I Know Things Now," Little Red Riding Hood describes her frightful journey through the woods to the Wolf's belly. She explains how the Wolf made her feel excited and scared before devouring her. She does a bit of growing up in this song as well, realizing she has expected her cape and hood to protect her from all danger. However, this time, it has not. She matures, deciding she no longer needs her cape and hood and gives it to The Baker to thank him for saving her life. With this, The Baker has two of the four items for the potion.

Upon Jack's arrival home, his mother throws the five magic beans out the window, angry he has exchanged their cow for beans. Cinderella and The Baker's Wife meet in the forest and The Baker's Wife prompts Cinderella for information about the festival. The Baker's Wife has many questions, though Cinderella is not forthcoming with information, likely because she has not enjoyed her time at the festival. As the bells of the first midnight chime, Cinderella runs off,

but not before The Baker's Wife notices her slippers as pure as gold. Upon the final chime of midnight, we hear the song, "First Midnight," where all the characters come out and present the lessons they have learned thus far on their journey.

Our second reflection song is presented when Jack appears after his first trip up the beanstalk. He tells of his journey in the land of the giants, where he has met a nice lady giant who gives him food and rest. Then, the giant's husband sees him and chases Jack down the beanstalk, but not before Jack steals several gold coins from the giant. Jack had always sought adventure, because he thought his village was too boring. It was not until his trip to the land of the giants that he was able to appreciate the world around him and gain some perspective. He attempts to give the coins to the Baker to buy Milky White back. Jack misunderstands the Baker's stuttering and heads back up the beanstalk, thinking the Baker has requested more money for the cow. Not long after the Baker celebrates his newfound riches, a Mysterious Man comes and steals the coins away. Disappointed, the Baker runs into the Baker's Wife, who has still not made it home, and has lost the cow, leaving them with just one of the four items: the cape as red as blood.

We then meet brothers, Cinderella's Prince and Rapunzel's Prince. They are pining over their respective love interests, whom they cannot reach, for Cinderella is running from her prince and Rapunzel's Prince cannot reach Rapunzel because she is stuck in a tower. The Mysterious Man has found the cow and returns it to the Baker, while the Baker's Wife has come upon Rapunzel's tower and is able to pull some of the hair as yellow as corn, leaving the pair with three of the four items. The Baker's Wife runs into Cinderella once again on her way home from the festival. She tries again, in vain, to obtain one of the slippers as pure as gold, before Cinderella runs off, once again pursued by Cinderella's Prince and Steward. When the Baker

and his wife find each other in the woods and realize they have obtained three of the four items, they rejoice and sing, “It Takes Two,” realizing it will take two of them to get this child, and they are better when they work together. When teaching this song, I explain when a couple has been together for a long time, as the Baker and Baker’s Wife have, you often get into a mundane routine, where you both wake up, go to work, come home, and go to bed before doing it all over again the next day. It does not mean you love each other any less, but you have gotten into a boring daily routine. However, this task they have been given has propelled them into the forest on this journey of discovery. They are seeing things in one another they forgot were there, or maybe they have never seen before. So, while normal couples also get into these normal everyday routines, it is always important to find moments and events to help reignite the spark and love you have for one another.

When Jack comes back after his second trip to the land of the giant, he attempts to use golden eggs from a hen to buy his cow back, but before the second midnight, Milky White dies, and so they must bury her. The characters come out and sing, “Second Midnight,” once again giving the audience an update on what they have learned thus far, before heading back into the woods again. Exhausted, the Baker’s Wife takes the last bean and heads off to find Cinderella to get the slipper as pure as gold, while The Baker goes off in search of a cow as white as milk. Thankfully, the Mysterious Man appears and returns the five gold pieces he had stolen from the Baker before. This gives the Baker enough money to buy a new cow.

During this time, the Witch also has discovered that Rapunzel had a visitor: Rapunzel’s Prince. The Witch explains, she locked Rapunzel in the tower in an effort to protect Rapunzel from the evils of the world, including princes. But, if Rapunzel wants to see the world, this is what she will get, and so the Witch cuts off Rapunzel’s hair and sends Rapunzel to a remote



desert. When Rapunzel's Prince returns to the tower, the Witch tricks him into climbing the hair before scaring him. He then falls into a patch of briar, blinding himself, before wandering and hoping to find Rapunzel. Jack meets Little Red Riding Hood and she dares him to go back to the land of the giant to steal the giant's golden harp. The young and naive child accepts the dare.

On the third night of the festival, the prince employed a ruse and smeared the steps of the palace with pitch, so Cinderella would get stuck on her way running out of the palace. She indeed gets stuck, and stops to sing, "On the Steps of the Palace," her reflection song. While she is not quite done with her journey, Cinderella stops to assess the situation at hand: she is nervous the prince will not like her when he finds out she is a mere peasant and not a princess. She realizes she does not know what she wants: does she want to go with the prince where she may feel out of place for the rest of her life, or should she go back home, where she does not feel like she fits in with her family? Cinderella has great difficulty in choosing, as this is her first big decision. In her everyday life, she does not have to make any decisions, as she is just a servant to her stepfamily. She then decides (twice) not to decide. She decides instead to leave the prince one of her shoes, and if he wants to come and find her, he can; if not, she is content at home with her stepfamily. Cinderella has chosen to put her fate in the hands of a man, so she does not have to make a decision on her own.

Like the other two midnights, the Baker's Wife sees Cinderella on the run from the prince once again. She offers to exchange a magic bean in exchange for one of Cinderella's golden slippers. Cinderella throws the bean, which will result in another beanstalk later. The Baker's Wife instead exchanges her own shoes for Cinderella's slipper, so Cinderella may run faster. Jack is caught by the male giant this time, so he runs down the beanstalk, pursued by the giant. When he gets to the bottom, Jack hacks the beanstalk down with his axe, and when the beanstalk

falls, the giant falls with it, killing the giant. But Jack is safe. The Witch appears on the third midnight to retrieve the items, of which the Baker and his wife have all four. The Baker has purchased a cow, which is not white, and covered it with flour to make it look as white as milk. The Witch sees through this and tells them she can bring the dead Milky White back to life. After she does, the Witch instructs The Baker and his wife to feed the objects to the cow. They do, and Jack attempts to milk the cow, but to no avail. They have produced the wrong ingredients, because not until now has the Witch mentioned, she cannot have touched the ingredients. Because the Witch has touched Rapunzel's hair, the ingredient does not work. The Mysterious Man appears and suggests using hair from an ear of corn. Always good with timing, this is the moment the Witch also chooses to let The Baker know the Mysterious Man is the Baker's father, whom he thought had died in a baking accident. They feed the hair to the cow, the cow produces milk, which is a potion the Witch drinks to reverse her curse of age and ugliness, thus making her young, beautiful, and powerless again. The spell on the Baker and his wife is lifted, and they are able to have a child, while Jack and his mother are rich, and can live happily with his cow. The Mysterious Man dies, having carried out his last task keeping him on earth to help lift the spell on his family.

Rapunzel, having born twins, and Rapunzel's Prince wander the earth until they at last find each other. Rapunzel weeps into her prince's eyes, and his sight is restored. When the four of them come upon the Witch, she attempts to reconcile with Rapunzel. Rapunzel does not want this, and as she tries to put a spell on them, the Witch realizes she has lost her powers.

Finally, Cinderella's Prince has gone on a search for Cinderella, and in an attempt to steal him, the stepsisters cut off a toe and heel in order to fit into the golden slipper. But the Prince notices the blood and sends them away. Cinderella tries on the blood-soaked slipper; it is a

match, and they are wed. When the Stepsisters come to the wedding, attempting to suck up to Cinderella, Cinderella's bird friends peck out the Stepsisters' eyes, blinding them. We end Act One with everyone who deserves to living happily ever after.

Many scholars argue that *Into the Woods* can stop here, and they could be correct. All is wrapped up, and most everyone is happy. This is actually where the youth theatre version, *Into the Woods, Jr.*, ends. But, stopping here is not something Sondheim would do. So, we begin Act Two with what happens after happily ever after.

The beginning of Act Two of *Into the Woods* is nearly identical to the beginning of Act One. The narrator introduces three houses, with some variations: Cinderella sits on a throne in the castle now; Jack's house is now drastically improved, as he is wealthier now; and the Baker and Baker's Wife bake bread in a crowded cottage, filled with baby things, and a baby. Though they all got their wishes by the end of Act One, they all now have new wishes, as is human nature. Once we get what we want, we want something else. In Act Two, Cinderella wishes to sponsor a festival; Jack would like to return to the kingdom of the giants; and the Baker and Baker's Wife would like more room. Everyone says they are *so* happy, which is completely unrealistic. They say they are happy so much that one wonders if they are trying to convince themselves they are happy. After all, they all have just gotten what they wish for, so they all should be happy. Perhaps they are left wondering why they still desire something more? We get a glimpse into their lives and begin to build a new stasis for Act Two, when there is a loud rumbling and shaking that disturbs the peace. The Witch intrudes on the Baker's house, and together they conjecture it is possibly a giant in the land. The Baker alerts both Jack's house and Cinderella's, before Little Red Riding Hood visits the Baker's house. Little Red Riding Hood's house has been destroyed, and she is on her way to move in with her Granny. Everyone then

heads into the woods on a new journey: Cinderella has been warned by her bird friends, the grave of her mother might be in danger, so she is off to check it out. Jack's Mother is off to get rid of the harp Jack stole from the giant. Jack is heading into the woods in an attempt to slay the giant, as he has done before. The Baker, Baker's Wife, and their child are accompanying Little Red Riding Hood on her way to Granny's.

As we move into the woods, it is clear the order has been broken, as the forest is a mess. We first see Rapunzel, who has clearly lost her mind, having been stuck in a tower for fourteen years; she does not understand the world around her. Cinderella's Prince and Rapunzel's Prince continue the similarities from Act One, when they sing "Agony (Reprise)," which is near identical to the song in the Act One, with the exception they are pining over different women, this time Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. They again cannot reach these women as Snow White is surrounded by dwarfs, and Rapunzel's Prince does not like dwarves, while Sleeping Beauty is in a tower surrounded by briar, and Cinderella's Prince does not like blood, considering his history with bloody slippers.

When the Baker, Baker's Wife, and Little Red Riding Hood get lost in the woods, they convene with the Stepmother, Stepsisters, Steward, Cinderella's Father, and the Witch, before being greeted by the Giant. We soon find out it is a woman Giant, the wife of the Giant whom Jack killed. She is there to get vengeance on Jack for stealing their belongings and, well, murder. As the group tries to figure out what to do, the Witch tosses the Narrator to the Giant, who picks him up, realizes he is not Jack, and drops him, killing the Narrator. Jack's Mother runs into the scene and speaks very pointedly with the Giant. As she is angering the Giant, the Steward hits Jack's Mother over the head with his staff, in an attempt to quiet her. This ends up killing Jack's Mother. Rapunzel also runs into the scene, followed by Rapunzel's Prince, and

although the Witch attempts to restrain her, Rapunzel runs underneath the Giant's foot as she begins to retreat. I have had many a discussion with my students on whether this was suicide or accidental. Rapunzel had been through a lot at this point. She had been sheltered from the world for fourteen years, then fell in love, had twins, was banished to a desert, her prince was blinded, and now a giant is roaming their kingdom. She has definitely gone mad and has potentially been sent over the edge at this point, and she may have just wanted to end it all. This scene alone does a lot to show how different this world is from the world in Act One. In Act One, the Wolf and Mysterious Man died, and the Wolf had it coming. But in Act Two, people are dying left and right, and not all these deaths are merited and/or expected.

The characters are numb and in shock as bodies are removed. The Witch sings, "Lament," grieving the loss of her daughter. She sings about how you can try to protect your children, but they will not listen to you. It is quite interesting to watch as the Witch goes through the five stages of grief throughout the rest of the show: denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. "Lament," definitely is a combination of denial and anger.

After this song, she jumps to bargaining when she says they need to find Jack to give him to the Giant. The Baker, Baker's Wife, and Little Red Riding Hood are sure there is another way: they think if they can get to Jack first, he can apologize to the Giant, and maybe she will leave them alone. They all head off in an attempt to find Jack, while the royal family is off to hide in a hidden kingdom until this is all over.

The Baker regresses into his feelings of not letting the Baker's Wife help, as he wants her to stay with Little Red Riding Hood and the baby, while he goes off in search of Jack. The Baker's Wife denies this idea and believes both of them should fan out and try to find Jack,

while Little Red Riding Hood stays with the baby. After an argument, they decide to walk 100 paces in opposite directions before returning.

The Baker's Wife comes upon Cinderella at the grave of her mother. The grave has been destroyed, and although Cinderella's Mother was already dead, we might consider this broken tree another death at the hand of the Giant. The Baker's Wife comes upon Cinderella's Prince in the woods, and she is smitten with him as ever. He seduces her, as he seems to do with all women, and he carries her into a glade. After their tryst, the Baker's Wife asks if they will do this again, and he says that it was just a one-time thing. Upon his departure, the Baker's Wife sits stunned, and sings the fourth and final reflection song, "Moments in the Woods." At first, she is shocked and cannot believe what just happened. She is quickly awakened to reality: she's married and needs to get back to finding Jack. She has a moment where she thinks it might be nice to have a Baker *and* a prince, but then she snaps out of her reverie. She begins to think about how this was just a memorable moment in the woods. And moments are great because they spice up our lives, but if our entire life was made up of amazing moments, we would have no perspective and not be able to appreciate these special moments for what they are. So, she concludes her reflection song, realizing what she did with Cinderella's Prince was wrong, but because she has had this moment with him, she will now go back home to the Baker and appreciate the Baker more because of this moment she had. She realizes what she had with the prince is not what she wants, she wants her life with the Baker, and can appreciate what she has. This is the Baker's Wife's reflection song because she is now done with her journey, as she dies immediately following this song.

We turn to The Baker, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and the baby, who are awaiting the return of the Baker's Wife. Instead, the Witch returns with Jack in tow. She is on

her way to feed Jack to the Giant. He carries a scarf, which we find out is the Baker's Wife's scarf, and the Witch tells the Baker his wife is dead. This moment is often overlooked, but it is the Witch's greatest moment of humanity:

BAKER: Where is my wife?

(*Beat*)

WITCH: She's dead.

BAKER (*Stunned*): What?

JACK: I'm sorry, sir. I came upon her. She was under a tree...

WITCH: He was sobbing over her like she was his own mother.

CINDERELLA: How awful...

BAKER (*Beat; lost*): How could this happen? I should never have let her wander off *alone*.

JACK: I buried her in a footprint.<sup>2</sup> (154)

Take a moment to imagine what we do not see in this scene: Jack is running, looking to slay the Giant, and on his way, he comes upon the body of the Baker's Wife under a tree. Though he did not know her well, he still mourns her loss. He begins to blame himself for this, as he was the one who stole from the Giant, and he was the one who killed the Giant. He feels at fault. Maybe he also begins to think about his own mother, whom he has not seen in quite some time. He might begin to wonder if she too is dead, which breaks him down further.

The Witch is glad to have found Jack, so she can bring him to the Giant. But she does not just grab him and go. She allows Jack to give the Baker's Wife this final moment of dignity: her burial. We as a society place a heavy emphasis on life and death. We celebrate the birth of new children with parties and family visitation. We mourn deaths with funerals, eulogies, burial, cremation, etc. We do not just leave bodies lying about. When we respect the person who has passed, we bury them. And the Witch had heart enough to let Jack bury the Baker's Wife, before she took him to the Giant.

---

<sup>2</sup> During a very serious scene, this line always gets a laugh, because it comes out of nowhere, and the audience needs something to laugh at by this point.

After this moment, the Baker, Jack, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and the Witch all sing, “Your Fault,” in an effort to place blame on the person who began all of this. The song goes around in circles, with the blame finally landing on the Witch, who replies with the song, “Last Midnight.” During this song, the Witch warns the others about the impending doom upon them. She mentions each of the character’s wishes, and the bad things they did to get their wish. She warns them the Giant will squish them all soon enough. She refers then to the song, “Your Fault.” She says if they really need to place the blame on someone, she will take the blame, but in return, she would like possession of Jack, so she can solve this problem and get rid of the Giant.

Here, The Witch ties up a theme we have seen twice before in the score: the words “nice” and “good.” Cinderella first introduces the scheme:

CINDERELLA: Mother said be good,  
Father said be nice,  
That was always their advice.  
So be nice, Cinderella,  
Good, Cinderella,  
Nice good good nice –  
FLORINDA: Tighter!  
CINDERELLA: What’s the good of being good  
If everyone is blind  
Always leaving you behind?  
Never mind, Cinderella,  
Kind, Cinderella –  
Nice good nice kind good nice – (11)

There seems to be an inner conflict for Cinderella as whether to be nice and/or good. It does not seem like she fully understands the difference here. However, Little Red Riding Hood learns the difference firsthand in her interactions with the Wolf. She concludes her reflection song, “I Know Things Now,” with:

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD: And though scary is exciting,



Nice is different than good. (45)

She has had a scary and exciting journey to the belly of the Wolf, and though the Wolf was very nice to her, he did not have good intentions. This warns the audience of ill-intended people. The Witch wraps up the theme by delineating herself from the rest of the world:

WITCH: You're so nice.  
You're not good,  
You're not bad,  
You're just nice.  
I'm not good,  
I'm not nice,  
I'm just right.  
I'm the witch.  
You're the world. (164)

The Witch believes, while the others have been trying to do what they think is good and not bad, they have not done either. They have merely done the nice thing, which has gotten them nowhere, as they are still in danger. The Witch points out she is not intending to do what is good or nice but what is right, which might not always coincide with what the world deems “good” or “nice.”

No one wants to believe or trust in the Witch, as she is, well, a witch. She gives up on teaching these people a lesson, and fears the Baker and his child will just continue the line of liars and thieves, just as the Baker's father once was. She decides to flee, and begins to scatter her magic beans all about, as Cinderella, The Baker, Jack and Little Red Riding Hood try their best to collect them, for fear of inviting more giants into their land. She then pleads for her mother to punish her once more with age, ugliness, and hopefully her powers back. She belts out one last note before disappearing.

I have conjectured with many on what has happened to the Witch here and where she goes at this point. Most believe because the Witch “loses” the beans again, as she had before our

story began, she does indeed turn old and ugly again and also regains her magic powers. But, where has she disappeared to? Some might say she has gone back to her tower or has left the woods completely, but my theory is the Witch uses the last bit of magic she has saved up to transport herself to another parallel kingdom, where she intends to begin this same story all over again in an effort to get it right.

In the 2002 Broadway Revival, Sondheim adjusted the lyrics and the Witch begins singing this song to the Baker's child, whom she has discreetly picked up while the others were arguing over whose fault this all was. It is a very chilling moment when she initially turns around, holding the baby, because if it is done correctly, the audience too has become so distracted with the argument, they do not notice the Witch pick up the child. The Witch eventually relinquishes the child, after her thoughts of whisking the child away to protection. At the end of this version, the Witch begins to swallow the beans after scattering several on the ground. She then rips off the sleeve of her dress to reveal a revolting arm, as well as removing her hair to reveal a balding, hideous scalp, as she is turning back into the cursed Witch. She then disappears into a puff of smoke.

While this version is quite disturbing, more so is the 2012 Central Park Delacorte Theater's production. The old and ugly Witch had been taken over by trees and branches all over her body. So, when the Witch went to disappear, the mulch-covered ground opened and a tree monster reached up, pulling the Witch into the ground. This was the only time the floor opened, so it was completely unexpected, and an overall horrifying effect.

After "Last Midnight," Cinderella, Jack, and Little Red Riding Hood all express remorse for what they have done, but not the Baker. The Baker is bitter and feels helpless, as he feels he

has lost everything at this point, having lost his wife. He decides to run away from his problems, leaving his baby with Cinderella.

When he runs away, he is met once again by the Mysterious Man. We begin to wonder if the Mysterious Man has ever been there at all, or if he is merely a spirit, appearing whenever the Baker is in need of assistance and guidance. There are numerous references throughout the script, calling the Mysterious Man a “spirit,” supporting this theory. The Mysterious Man expresses his remorse for how he has messed up the Baker’s family. He had no idea his actions would bring them to this dismay. The Baker wants to run away from all this mess, and the Mysterious Man says they can, but he warns the Baker’s problems will only follow him. He urges the Baker to stop this cycle and face his problems, before he disappears one last time. The Baker has been changed and intends to solve the problem of the Giant.

The Baker goes back to the group, and they come up with a plan: they will smear the ground with pitch and lure the Giant into this area. The Giant will get stuck and not be able to move. Cinderella’s bird friends will peck at the Giant’s eyes, and The Baker and Jack will hit her over the head with a club to kill her. They all go and set up this attack, while Cinderella stays with the baby. Cinderella’s Prince happens by, and he and Cinderella agree to part ways.

This is when Little Red Riding Hood and Jack realize they are on their own. Little Red Riding Hood sees her Granny’s house crushed and realizes both her mother and Granny are dead; the Baker breaks the news to Jack that his mother is dead. Cinderella and the Baker comfort the children with the song, “No One is Alone.” After this touching moment, the four put their plan into action and kill the Giant.

The survivors: Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack, The Baker, and child, agree to move in together and create their own family. The Baker worries he will not be able to raise his

child on his own, but the spirit of the Baker's Wife returns to assure him he can do it. This segues into the spirit of the Witch singing, "Children Will Listen," warning adults to be careful with the words they choose to use with their children, as they are listening and will look to them for advice. The musical concludes with a reprise of the main "Into the Woods" theme, alerting us to keep on wishing, and not to sit around and wait for your wishes to come true, but to go out and pursue those wishes.

Cinderella has the last line, with a final, "I wish!" letting us know the cycle will always continue, and we will forever be wishing for more.

### *Company*

In Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's *Company*, we delve into the mind of 35-year-old New Yorker, Robert, as he forms his opinions of love and marriage through the relationships of his friends and girlfriends. *Company* was the first musical to be written with a non-linear plotline. It actually reads more like a stream of consciousness in Robert's mind. It is Robert's 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, and we return to this 35<sup>th</sup> birthday party three times throughout the musical, yet we cannot be sure if Robert ever makes it to the birthday party, or if each time is merely what Robert has imagined this surprise party would be like. Each scene flows seamlessly into the other, like a train of thought, with each scene introducing the next. There are even songs interjected into scenes, sung by characters who are not in the scene. But, because something in the scene has initiated another thought, the related song appears within the given scene.

*Company* begins on Robert's 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. He is just getting home and listens to several voicemails from his friends wishing him a Happy Birthday. Joanne is the first voicemail and sets the mood of the show with her first line:

JOANNE: Hi, this is a dirty phone call. (Sondheim, *Company* 1)

This, as well as the other voice mails, let us know this is going to be a comedy. We learn Robert is a bachelor and also hear voicemails from two of Robert's girlfriends, so we know he dates. Robert responds to these voicemails with his voicemail message, and he ends with a line letting us know he is a people pleaser:

ROBERT: And whatever you're calling about my answer is yes. (2)

We transition into Robert's surprise birthday party, as all of his coupled friends appear with gifts and rehearsed salutations. At first, the group of couples all respond to Robert at the same time, in the same way, giving a robotic, intoned feeling. As the scene progresses, we transfer from this into a more natural party atmosphere. We get a very small glimpse of each of the characters and begin to realize they are all Robert's friends, but this is the first time any of these couples have met the others.

We transition into the opening number, "Company." The song begins with the couples all calling to Robert by all of his many nicknames. The couples progress by singing lines separately or with their partner about how they need Robert or would like to get together with him. The couples sing in unison about how much they love Robert and would love for him to come over for dinner. Robert responds for the first time with a solo section about how much he loves his friends and all of the fun things they do together. He thinks his friendship with these couples are what life is all about; he does not mention relationships, as he holds his friendships above romantic relationships at this point. After Robert's solo, the couples continue to call on Robert for different favors. This time, Robert responds to each of them. The song concludes with a reprise of Robert's solo verse, where everyone exclaims their love for the relationship they have with Robert; they love his company.

Out of this song, we segue to an after-dinner conversation in Sarah and Harry's apartment. We soon see Sarah and Harry are both battling with compulsions: Harry is an alcoholic and is trying combat his need for alcohol, while Sarah is trying to lose weight and has a desperate need to eat everything. Sarah also feels it necessary to correct Harry in absolutely everything he says and does, which can be trying at times. The couples provoke each other in their compulsions whenever possible. Continuing the teasing, Harry and Robert push Sarah to show off some of her karate, which she has been studying. This brings out the competitive nature in Harry and Sarah. She pins him first, then he pins her. On the third time, they come to a stalemate, before one last time when Robert finds himself in the middle of the attack. During all of this, Joanne comes in to sing, "The Little Things You Do Together." In this song, she comments about all the fun and odd things couples do to make a relationship. The rest of the couples join in the last chorus and add insight into the quirky things they each do together to make their relationship work. The placement of this song here shows that although Sarah and Harry are competitive, while she may correct him, and while he may be an alcoholic, these are things helping their relationship to work. These things may seem odd from the outside, or from Robert's perspective, but these are what keep this couple together.

When Sarah heads to bed, Robert prompts Harry with the question, "You ever sorry you got married?" (31) Harry then sings, "Sorry-Grateful," with David and Larry each singing a verse, leading us to believe Robert has had this conversation with each of them at different times. They tell him about the different sides of their marriage: they sometimes feel alone, but they are never actually alone, or how things are always the same, but different. The song concludes with the idea that there are negatives to all the positives, but they are complete nonetheless.

This song directly transitions into a brief scene on Peter's and Susan's balcony, in which they present this very sweet and loving relationship to Robert. He thinks it is the epitome of perfect relationships. They then inform Robert they are getting a divorce, shattering everything Robert thought he knew about what he wanted or understood about relationships.

Act One, Scene Four begins in Jenny and David's apartment after they have just smoked marijuana, a first for strait-laced Jenny. She is overly concerned with what she *should* be feeling and is less in tune to what she is actually feeling. She has tried this for David's sake, as she believes this is what David wants. She tries to be cool about it and be a good wife for David, but he is okay with who she really is and does not need her to play this up. The three get into a deep conversation of whether they would like to be single again, even for just an hour or two. David wishes, but takes the thought back, possibly trying to cover himself, and concludes that though he had to give up things to be married, he is happy he gave it up for this married life he now has. Robert expresses his fear, how once you get married, you can never get out of it; you are always married, and even if you divorce, you will always have been married. From this, Jenny concludes Robert is not ready for marriage. Robert explains how he is totally ready and how he has been dating several women: Kathy, April, and Marta. These women appear and sing, "You Could Drive a Person Crazy." David and Jenny freeze as the girlfriends sing about what an enigma Robert is. They have each gone on dates with Robert, where everything seems to be going well, until Robert stops responding for no apparent reason. They finish by stating how they think Robert is a great guy, but he is kind of crazy, and they are moving on without him. Because we are hearing these things from Robert's memory, we are led to believe these are the sort of things the girlfriends said throughout their relationship with Robert, and as each

relationship has ended. What is amusing is, though he is describing all the women he is dating, they have all already moved on from him.

After the song, we return to Jenny and David's apartment. Jenny continues to overcompensate with what she thinks David wants her to be. They debate smoking another joint but decide against it. Jenny leaves, and David reveals he does not believe Jenny enjoyed smoking because she is too square, but Robert seems to have seen something else and believes she is smarter than David gives her credit for.

As we exit Jenny and David's apartment, Robert is met with a reprise of "Bobby-Baby" from the opening; however, this time, the couples all try to fix Robert up with different girls they know, because they all think he needs someone in his life. This then transitions into a song by all the men, "Have I Got a Girl for You." Larry and Peter each have a verse lewdly describing women they know, whom Robert should go out with, because he is sure to get lucky with them. These men express how lucky Robert is to be single, as they all wish they could be again and not be tied down. This song is a great departure from the previous men's song, "Sorry-Grateful." The first song leaves us feeling like the men deeply appreciate their wives, where "Have I Got a Girl for You," is more guys being guys and sexualizing women. Neither is an overly positive or negative view of men but gives both perspectives.

This song moves us into Robert's first full solo, "Someone is Waiting." Here, Robert conjures up the perfect woman by picking out all the parts he likes in the wives of each couple. He wonders if he would recognize "the one" if he saw her, or if he perhaps has already missed her. He ends with an odd opposition of asking his ideal mate to wait for him, while he hurries to her. It then reduces to simply, "Hurry. Wait for me," (53) which shows Robert's indecision about whether he is actually ready for the right woman.



Act One, Scene Five begins with the song “Another Hundred People.” Sondheim felt bad for the actress who originated the role of Marta and so decided to write her this song to feature her. It does not further the plot or give the audience any further insight to Robert’s feelings on relationships, but it is more a love song to New York City, our show’s locale. This song does aid in stringing together three separate scenes with each of the girlfriends. First up is flight attendant, April: in this scene, we learn how awkward and odd April is and how she made her way to New York. Robert does little to further the conversation with April but enjoys merely sitting back and listening to her prattle on. Next is Kathy: through this scene, it is clear Kathy and Robert have a long romantic history and have dated off and on for several years. Kathy has brought Robert to her special spot in Central Park, but Robert seems bored, as he is missing out on a party.<sup>3</sup> It is revealed that Robert would have married Kathy, and Kathy would have married Robert, but they are unsure why the other never pursued this. They entertain this idea briefly before Kathy tells Robert she is moving back to Cape Cod and getting married. She states she is done playing around the city and is ready to settle down and make a life with a family. It is hard to say whether Kathy is actually engaged or if this was a scare tactic to get Robert to settle down. She may have fabricated this engagement in hopes Robert would see what he was about to lose and tell Kathy to break off this engagement and marry him, a last-ditch effort. Real or not, Robert does not take the bait, as he still is not ready to settle down at this point, and so he loses Kathy for good. We finish this scene wondering if Kathy might have been “the one” for Robert. Marta ends “Another Hundred People” and immediately jumps into her date with Robert. She expresses her deep love for New York City and all the many different people who inhabit it. It is

---

<sup>3</sup> This is likely the same 35<sup>th</sup> surprise birthday party mentioned throughout the show. Why else would there be reference to a party?

clear Marta is younger than Robert, and she really pushes him out of his comfort zone by talking about crazy things he is not used to talking about. He clearly appreciates how quirky she is.

The action transitions to Paul's and Amy's apartment, who are getting ready to be married. The song begins with a very ceremonial, wedding sound and a woman sings to rejoice this beautiful day. Paul sings a verse about how happy he is to be marrying Amy. And while at first it seems Amy too is happy to be getting married, she actually is not. In her head, she addresses the congregation in song: she thanks them all for coming, but would love it even more if they would leave, as she is not getting married today. The ceremonial woman's voice comes back, and we begin to realize this voice is haunting Amy with thoughts of how awful this will all be, even though she sings it with a sweet, operatic quality. Amy continues with another several verses of patter about how scary it is to get married and how everyone needs to leave immediately because Amy and Paul definitely are not getting married today. The woman's voice chimes in again, warning of the rainstorm outside. Amy's patter continues, layered with Paul's legato proclamation of love for Amy. This gives a distinct juxtaposition between Paul's love and willingness to marry against Amy's fear and terror about getting married. After the song, the craziness continues as Amy rambles on while getting ready for the wedding. Robert does his best to lighten the mood with odd jokes and anecdotes. Amy continues to get irritated as she cannot understand why Paul is so happy and willing to marry. She cites reasons why she is not meant to get married and why the two are not meant for each other, none of which stick, of course. Up until now, Robert has supported equally both husband and wife in each relationship. He backs up the wives as much as he does the husbands. It is not until this moment that he seems to falter:

PAUL: Amy, if anybody should be married, it's you. Tell her, Robert.

AMT: Robert tell me? Who's going to tell Robert?

*(Pause)*

ROBERT: Paul, I can't tell anybody anything like that. I guess whatever is right will happen.

*(Pause)*

PAUL: I see.

ROBERT: Listen, I'm going to call and say that, ah...that...that we'll be late.

That we'll be a little late. The people will be getting there, don't you think?

*(EXITS)* (68-69)

While it is true Robert should not be giving anyone marital advice, it is odd he does not attempt for some sort of middle ground here. He sides with Amy, potentially because there has been something between them all along. We are led to believe Amy and Robert had a friendship before Amy and Paul got together. Maybe there was a spark between them, which neither Robert or Amy ever pursued, but they both missed their chance when Amy and Paul got together. The pause, as well as Paul's "I see," give a feeling Paul has always had an instinct about the feelings between the two but had always pushed the thought aside. However, Robert siding with Amy on this confirms his suspicions.

Paul moves on from this thought, as he really loves Amy. He tries again to persuade her to proceed with the wedding, thinking she still is not really serious. In his last effort, he explains that you see what you want to see. If all Amy wants to see in their relationship are the faults, those are what she is going to see. But Paul is able to see through their faults to what is right about their relationship. This still does not affect Amy, and she finally stops the conversation with this very real, direct line:

AMY: Please. I'm not being emotional. I'm as sane as can be. Paul? I'm sorry.  
I don't love you enough. (70)

Paul finally gets the message and leaves, deeply wounded. Both Amy and Robert sit in shock, and out of nowhere Robert suggests he and Amy get married, as he thinks they are alike in their

fear of marriage. But Amy points out Robert is afraid to *not* get married, while Amy is afraid *to* get married. She hits a poignant line here when she says:

AMY: ...it's just that you have to want to marry *somebody*, not just *somebody*.  
(71)

She means to say Robert believes he is ready to be married, and so he is willing to marry anyone. But he needs to find the right person to marry, not just anyone. With this, Amy realizes Paul is the *somebody* she wants to marry, and she leaves to catch him before he calls off the wedding. She is now excited to be married. Another reprise of “Bobby-Baby” interrupts the scene to let Robert know he has had another groundbreaking moment and discovered some more information about relationships and marriage with Amy’s statement. This segues into the optional Robert solo, “Marry Me a Little,” which is performed more often than not nowadays.

“Marry Me a Little,” which closes Act One, leaves Robert idealizing the perfect marriage. However, everything he talks about is the opposite of marriage. He does not want to have to change or give up anything for this relationship, when relationships are all about compromise. He wants to be married but with freedom. The song is filled with numerous opposites, before Robert concludes by singing, “I’m ready!” when it is clear he is definitely not ready to be married.

As Act Two begins, and we hear the same haunting “Bobby-Baby” melody we heard as the overture of Act One, just abbreviated. The scene starts, and we are back at Robert’s 35<sup>th</sup> birthday party, right after Robert has blown out the candles on his cake. This time, the dialogue is truncated and moves at a quicker pace. The scene ends, transitioning into the song, “Side by Side,” and Robert sings of his love for his friends. He sings about how much he enjoys the connection he has with each couple and how wonderful it is to be the third wheel in these

couples, which is an odd thing to be rejoicing. The couples begin to return the sentiment with short musical phrases and spoken lines about how wonderful and positive Robert is to have around. These feelings of sentiment for Robert turn into a worry as the couples sing, “What Would We Do Without You?” The tempo and feel of the two songs are very different. “Side by Side by Side” has a very easy-going, laid back feeling while “What Would We Do Without You?” is more intense and quick. It matches who is doing the majority of singing in these songs as well: “Side by Side by Side” is primarily sung by Robert to the couples, and so it is a relaxed song, as is Robert, where “What Would We Do Without You?” is more frantic, as the couples have been characterized in this show. Also, couples always have something to do, and somewhere to go, a driving force in life. This is not to say single people do not have a purpose in life, but it merely demonstrates how much more couples have happening in their life, as they are constantly having to think about the other person in their relationship, as well as their family.

As the song concludes, three of the five couples have a short call and response dance break with their partner; one partner does a dance step and their partner responds with something corresponding. After the three, Robert attempts something similar but is met with silence. This is a stark realization for Robert, as he realizes he does not have a partner. It seems simple, but up to this point in this song, Robert has been content with being the third of each of these relationships, but he now realizes this makes him the odd one out. The couples finish the showbiz number, while Robert stands alone with his new insight.

As this song ends, the scene transitions into April’s first visit to Robert’s apartment. From the top of the scene, it is clear why Robert has brought her here. April walks in, deeply inspecting the bachelor apartment, as if she has never seen anything quite like it, when it is still, in fact, a nicely-furnished bachelor pad. Robert points out how he never really spends any time

in it but merely passes through on his way to somewhere else. Robert leads April to tour his bedroom, and as they do, Robert is visited by visions of Sarah, Harry, Jenny, and David. He imagines each couple's concern for Robert being home all alone, with no one to share his time, while Robert is actually home with a girl. It is as if Robert has brought April here to prove his friends wrong, though it is clear he has other intentions as well. April launches into a lengthy monologue about a cocoon gifted to her from a previous date. Her entire conversation throughout this scene feels like a need either to fill the silence in the room or an effort to stop the inevitable from happening between them: intimacy. Robert tells his own story, which may or may not (more likely) be true. His story tells of an intimate night he had with a woman, and he uses his storytelling as a tool to seduce April, realizing the way to get through to April is through words. He succeeds, as the stage directions indicate April removes her clothing and slips into bed during the final lines of Robert's monologue. As Robert and April indulge in their impulses, visions of the wives appear, scrutinizing April as they sing "Poor Baby." They mention how they want Robert to be happy, but question whether she is too dumb, tacky, vulgar, old, tall, aggressive, or neurotic.

There are a number of options for what happens next in the show: originally there was a song called, "Tick-Tock" featuring an exotic dance by Kathy, while Robert and April roll around in bed. The song is instrumental, aside from ooh's and aah's, and several voice overs from Robert, April, and the couples. The song feels out of place to many and is often skipped. The 2011 New York Philharmonic Concert did utilize this song, which was my first introduction to the song, as I am sure it was for many. Instead of "Tick-Tock," some productions may opt for the "Have I Got a Girl (Reprise)." This song makes complete sense here, as the original song is all about Robert making it with a woman, then telling them all about it. Since Robert has just

been intimate with a woman, he would likely have thoughts of his male friends, who definitely will want to live vicariously through him and hear all about it. Though this reprise makes sense, I have never seen it in production, and I am curious how the show would flow with it. What I have seen most often is the action flows directly from the end of “Poor Baby” into “Barcelona.” The couple would have their intimate act, as the wives look on analyzing, and then the couple falls asleep, before an alarm goes off for April to wake up and get to work.

“Barcelona” adds some comedy and breaks any awkwardness the audience may feel after Robert and April get close. The next morning, April gets ready to do the walk of shame, as she has an early flight to Barcelona. Here, Robert does some fairly bad acting, where he asks April if she really has to go, when, in fact, he is completely okay with her leaving so he can get back to sleep. Robert’s acting must have been too good, as April decides to stay, much to Robert’s chagrin.

Peter and Susan are the only couple with whom we have two scenes, likely because both scenes are fairly short. This time, Robert has brought Marta to meet his friends, another first for him. Marta enjoys observing this couple, especially because Peter and Susan have recently made their divorce official. To make things even weirder, Peter is still living at home with Susan after the divorce, as he has responsibilities and needs to be there to care for Susan and the kids. In an alternate version of this scene, not included with the Music Theatre International rental materials, Susan and Marta head into the house, leaving Peter and Robert alone on the terrace. They converse, and Peter eventually asks Robert if he has ever had a homosexual experience. He says he has, as has Peter. Peter then propositions Robert, but Robert laughs it off as a joke. For many years, people have conjectured the reason Robert is not ready for marriage is because he is gay. I believe this scene was inserted as a way to dispel these rumors, though I am not sure it does. I

am unsure why it has been removed from the rental version, unless this scene was the original version, and it was extracted to remove any traces of homosexuality from Robert.

Furth and Sondheim have saved the best for last, as Joanne is one of Sondheim's famous leading ladies, and any *Company* fan has been waiting for the moment Joanne sings, "The Ladies Who Lunch." She and Larry are the final couple Robert has a scene with and it is clear the three have been out for a long night, as they are heavily intoxicated at the club, which is a bit odd, as Joanne and Larry are the oldest of Robert's friends. Larry is on the dance floor, while Robert and Joanne hold court.

When Sondheim was writing *Company*, he realized he knew little about marriage, as he had never been married. So, he met with his friend Mary Rodgers, whom had been married twice, and she told him all she knew about marriage, while Sondheim took notes as if he were taking a class. When we begin this scene with Joanne and Robert, she is telling Robert all about her previous husbands, so this seems to be Sondheim's homage to Mary and how she helped with this show. (*Six by Sondheim* 0:56:30-57:15)

As Larry comes back into the scene from dancing, he is being sweet to Joanne, as is habitual with him. He seems to have a sweet relationship with Joanne, whom normally accepts his affection. However, in this scene, she is not. She pokes fun and ridicules Larry. This seems to be a result of her relationship with Robert. Robert and Joanne drink *a lot* when they are together, so her demeaning attitude could be a result of the alcohol. One can also conjecture Joanne may be trying to show off and maintain her tough exterior in front of Robert. Robert does not fuel this in any way, but it is clear Robert and Joanne are different people when they get together.



Joanne sings one of Sondheim's most famous tunes, "The Ladies Who Lunch." In this song, Joanne scoffs at all the different types of powerless women there are in the world. She is frustrated the men have all the power, yet women are doomed to worry about their bodies, learn about art, or keep house. The frustration goes deeper, as it is probable Joanne has played all these roles at one time or another. The women Joanne is referencing to often will turn to alcohol out of boredom and frustration, as they sit and wait for their fateful death. Sondheim concluded this song with several repetitions of the word, "Rise!" as he hoped the audience would be compelled to jump up and give a standing ovation for Joanne's performance of this song. The only time I have ever seen this occur is for Anna Kendrick in the fictional film, *Camp*.

Post song, Joanne insults Larry some more, as well as marriage itself. Having had enough, Larry goes to pay the check. While he is gone, Robert has a very long monologue. It seems to be a mix of the alcohol talking, as well as Robert trying to fill the awkward silence, as Joanne just sits and stares at Robert. Finally, she prompts him for an affair:

JOANNE: When are we gonna make it?

(*Pause*)

ROBERT: I beg your pardon?

JOANNE: When're we gonna make it?

ROBERT: (*Making light of it*) What's wrong with now?

JOANNE: (*Slowly, directly*) There's my place. It's free tomorrow after two.

Larry goes to his gym, then right to the office. Don't talk. Don't do your folksy Harold Teen<sup>4</sup> with me. You're a terribly attractive man. The kind of a man most women want and never seem to get. I'll take care of you.

(*Pause*)

ROBERT: But who will I take care of? (Sondheim, *Company* 108)

This moment is a revelation for both Joanne and Robert, as we see Robert has instinctually said he needs someone to take care of. This is the moment we realize he is ready to be married,

---

<sup>4</sup> An extremely dated reference, as the Harold Teen comic strip ended its run in 1959. (Markstein)

however he does not want to admit it. Whether it be because of self-pride or wanting to seem cold in front of Joanne, Robert feels the need to take this comment back. It could also be because Robert has built up this persona who does not want or need to get married but is also not ready for marriage. Well, now it seems he is.

This is proven further when the company comes out with another variation of the “Bobby-Baby” theme. This time, the couples sing with intensity and have a nightmarish feel, prompting Robert to exclaim, “What do you get?” (109) as he does not see the payoff for marriage. He thinks you give up so much for marriage, but what do you get in return for it? He then sings, “Being Alive,” in which he mentions all the things he thinks a marriage is. Some of the attributes seem to have a negative connotation, while others feel more positive. Between verses, the couples speak lines, urging Robert to continue to pursue marriage. Amy has the final line and implores Robert to blow out the candles and wish for something he really wants. He tells us his wish, which is to find someone who fulfills all the things he previously has mentioned. He repeats all the things he had previously said in the song, but he replaces the pronoun from “someone” to “somebody,” so the song goes from a commentary about what is needed in a relationship to a plea for someone to come into Robert’s life and be all of those things to him. He wants someone to make him feel alive.

Upon the final song’s conclusion, the slow “Bobby-Baby” theme is heard, as it was at the top of the show, and we are back at Robert’s 35<sup>th</sup> birthday party, only this time Robert has not shown up. The couples have all waited for him to show up, but after two hours, they do not think he is coming. They first conjecture something might be wrong but then realize something is probably right. Robert does not necessarily need the couples any longer to be his company, as he is out finding someone to make him feel alive. Robert comes out from hiding, (perhaps he

has been there hiding all along?) and he blows out the birthday candles, finally wishing for *somebody*.

It is my belief that this final birthday scene actually is what transpires. The others are what Robert imagines his birthday to be like, but they only happen in his mind, which is why they are fairly robotic and repetitive. But this moment we keep coming back to is when Robert looks back at all the relationships in his life, what he took from them, and what has prepared him for marriage.

### *Merrily We Roll Along*

All the action in *Merrily We Roll Along* moves backwards in time, beginning in 1976 and ending in 1957. Our story concerns three friends, Frank, Charley, and Mary, and their 20-year friendship with one another. During the Overture, the script calls for a slideshow depicting the story we are about to see. We see the friends' early days, their successes as writers, reviews of their work, winning awards, marriage, and divorce. The opening song, "Merrily We Roll Along," sets us up for a repetitive theme throughout the show. The song examines the path we take to achieve our dreams. You have a dream in sight, but you can often stray from the path on the way to this dream. Your dreams can also change or become different depending on your life choices. Sometimes the road to your dreams can be troublesome and other times easy, but either way, you have to roll with the punches and continue the path to get to your dream. This song is reprised seven times throughout the show, as transitions in between scenes. Every time we move from one scene to the next, there is a transition song, which allows for costume and set changes. Each of these transitions varies in length but is always some cutting or deviation of the original opening song. The opening song then directly segues into Act One, Scene One, 1976.

For the rest of this synopsis/analysis, I will be going in chronological order, for clarity. When analyzing this text with my students, as well as blocking and staging the show, we went chronologically first, before transitioning to show order, or reverse-chronological.

The beginning of Frank, Charley, and Mary's journey begins in Act Two, Scene Five, in 1957. Frank is on the roof of their 110<sup>th</sup> Street apartment building in New York City. Frank, a music writer, and playwright Charley have just moved into this building together. Frank is on leave from the military<sup>5</sup> for the weekend to help Charley move the couple things they own into their tiny apartment. Charley comes up to the top of the building to see something, but what it is the characters have not divulged yet. Overnight, Frank has stayed up reading both of Charley's plays, which have really inspired Frank. He propositions Charley to turn his political play into a musical with Frank. Frank then begins to sing "Our Time," about being on the brink of something great. He feels something buzzing around them and thinks it is their time to change the world, though Charley is a bit apprehensive. As they continue the song, Charley becomes slightly more interested and feels what Frank is referring to. Mary, a book writer, then comes onto the roof, and the three click almost instantaneously. She complements Frank's music, which she has heard over the last couple days. They look up at the sky for the thing they all went up there for, and it is to see Sputnik<sup>6</sup>. Sputnik represented a lot for people at this time. Before then, people only wondered and imagined what could be out there in space, let alone imagine people going into space. To see a country launch a satellite gave the generation a sense of hope and determination to do whatever they dreamed they could do. The trio finishes "Our Time,"

---

<sup>5</sup> The Vietnam War began in 1955, and Frank has been in the army for the last two years, so it is likely he was inspired to join the army by the beginning of The Vietnam War.

<sup>6</sup> Sputnik was the first satellite to be launched into space, in 1957, by the Soviet Union.

singing together with wonderment, as they imagine what the future holds in store for them. They seal their friendship with a pinky promise.

In Act Two, Scene Four, we see the trio in their early days trying to make it as writers. This scene is comprised of one song, “Opening Doors,” and is a montage spanning the years 1957-1959 in New York City. This song shows Frank at the piano, writing music, while Charley writes his plays, and Mary writes for magazines and books. They make headway little by little: Frank gets a job as a rehearsal pianist, plays at a jazz club, gets a meeting with a producer; Charley writes a one-act, and it goes into rehearsals; Mary is in and out of numerous jobs and relationships, all while trying to write a story or book. All the while, Frank and Charley are also attempting to write a political show together, *Take a Left*. They get some work done and meet with a producer, Joe Josephson, and his secretary, Gussie, to play some of it for them. Joe enjoys the songs they play for him, but Joe claims they are not “hummable” songs, so they will not do well. He suggests they make their music a little more mainstream. And while things were going well before and they were making headway, now they are not. Frank loses his job at the jazz club, Charley’s one-act is no longer being produced, and Mary’s book was rejected. They feel like their luck has ended, until Frank has an idea to take matters into their own hands: he suggests they do a revue of their work, old and new. They cast a girl, Beth, to sing in the revue, as Mary does not perform. They all begin preparations to perform the revue, “Frankly Frank,” which makes them all feel like they are back on track with their goals for success. One thing that feels especially odd in all this is naming the show “Frankly Frank,” when it is a revue of all three of their work. Though many think a lot of Stephen Sondheim’s work is autobiographical, this is one song which is, as he and his friends of this time period were all banging on doors, trying to have their works seen, heard, or read.

Act Two, Scene Three takes place at The Downtown Club, 1960, where their revue, “Frankly Frank” has been doing two shows a night for five months at this point, which is pretty successful for something they seem to have thrown together. The scene begins, and Frank, Charley, and Beth are performing, “Bobby and Jackie and Jack,” a parody of The Kennedys. This song does not further the plot but is our only insight into what their political musical, *Take a Left*, might have sounded like. If the rest of the material followed suit, this show definitely would have been a flop. After the song, we find out Frank and Beth are getting married at The Downtown Club this evening. Mary, who was not in the show, goes to speak to Beth’s parents, only to find out they are not very excited about the wedding, as they do not think writing music is a “steady, secure job.” (Sondheim, *Merrily* 128) Frank and Charley speak to their producer, Joe, as he is in attendance at the show. Joe expresses interest in their work and mentions their material is becoming more commercial, which could mean big things for Frank and Charley. Joe also introduces his fiancé, Gussie, his former secretary. This show has cheered her up, as she is going through a messy divorce. This is quite interesting to note, as Gussie has not made her divorce official yet but already has gotten herself engaged to Joe. It is also mentioned that Gussie has become famous for performing onstage. It is probably very easy to get jobs performing onstage when your lover and fiancé is a producer. This is the first time we begin to see Gussie is a bit of a climber, though she seems unassuming within the context of this scene.

Before the wedding, both Charley and Mary assure Frank he does not have to go through with the wedding if he does not want to. This conversation is brushed aside when Beth’s parents ask to speak to Frank and Beth. It was mentioned that Beth is pregnant, which may have been their reason for marriage. Before they speak to Beth’s parents, Beth tests Frank by telling him she is no longer pregnant. He says he originally wanted to marry her because of the baby, but he

still wants to marry her because he loves her. This is the correct answer, as Beth lets out that she actually is pregnant. This moment is quite deceptive and raises some concerns with Beth. While in the 1960s plenty of people were getting married because of surprise pregnancies, she should have trusted Frank was a good guy and not felt the need to trick him into saying he loved her and still wanted to marry her.

Beth's parents attempt to call the wedding off by offering Frank \$2,000, but he refuses. Frank and Beth get married, exchanging their vows with the song "Not a Day Goes By." Frank and Mary reflect on their never-ending love for one another and how they never want it to end, and if it does, they feel like they might die. They want days and days with each other. Portions of this song are also sung by Mary, whom up to this point thought there was something between her and Frank. So, she sings, echoing the sentiments of the couple, wishing she was marrying Frank instead of Beth. This is a very heartbreaking moment for Mary.

Act Two, Scene Two bursts alive with the song, "The Blob." This scene takes place in Joe and Gussie's brownstone apartment on Sutton Place, 1962. Joe and Gussie are now married, and her success continues to grow. The scene is a party, held at their apartment to introduce everyone to Frank and Charley. In this scene, the ensemble represents "The Blob." The Blob is a group of well-known people, who all have a collective opinion and give generic exclamatory responses to everything. They are overly concerned with everything hip and new. When Frank and Charley get to the party, they are nervous about sharing their work, especially because they do not feel like they fit it, where Beth is overly concerned with all the famous people she is seeing at this party. They find Gussie, whom "accidentally" spills champagne on Beth, who was originally planning to return the dress she was wearing. Gussie sends Beth to her bedroom to borrow one of her dresses, which gets rid of Beth for some time. This leaves Frank and Gussie

alone, as they head to the rooftop greenhouse. Gussie seductively gets to know Frank and then prompts him to write a musical for her. She sings, “Growing Up,” in an effort to persuade (seduce) him further. This slow and sultry song tells Frank he is on his way to greatness, he just has to go and get it. Because Charley had previously insisted Frank make all business decisions, Frank alone makes the decision he and Charley will write this musical for Gussie, putting *Take a Left* aside. Gussie then proceeds to tell Frank this musical should just be showy and flashy, with little depth. He immediately regrets this decision, as this is not the kind of material Charley intends to write. Charley hopes to make a statement with his work and this piece definitely will not be doing that.

Gussie gets the room’s attention by pounding on the grand piano keys, demonstrating her utter lack of respect for musical instruments, the same instruments which help write the music for the shows making her famous. She announces these writers are going to be very famous one day and the song they are all about to hear may be in the show they are writing for Gussie and Joe, all of which is news to Charley. Before Charley can get more information, Frank prompts him to sing, “Good Thing Going.” This is a very simple ballad, which mirrors the relationship between Frank and Charley. It talks about how their friendship began simply and slowly, but they suddenly realized they had something good going between them. Just like every relationship, it has its ups and downs, though in the end of the song, it seems the love has been lost. Though at this point in their relationship, they have not lost their friendship; when the show is performed in reverse-chronological order, we know the couple eventually has a falling out, and this song seems like foreshadowing. When the song is over, everyone seems to really love it, and Gussie requests they play it again. Mary and Charley urge against this, as they know it is better to leave an audience wanting more. However, Frank, always at the mercy of the crowd,



decides they should sing it again, and Frank sings along with Charley this time, needing to be in the limelight this time. Because The Blob already has heard the song, they are not as focused or listening as intently. The second time “Good Thing Going” is sung, it is interspersed with sporadic lines from the ensemble about random other topics. It is clear, quite quickly, their attention span has waned, and they are ready to move on to the next big thing. Embarrassed and feeling out of place, Charley rushes out, followed shortly after by the others.

However, the drama Charley caused by exiting the party must have been forgotten, as we begin Act Two, Scene One on the opening night of the aforementioned musical. It is 1964, and we are onstage at The Alvin Theatre<sup>7</sup>, during one of Gussie’s solos in the musical, *Musical Husbands*. As Act Two begins, Gussie is singing alone onstage, conflicted about which man she should be with. We are led to believe she is referring to choosing between Frank and Joe, but as she begins to overact, we realize she is acting in a musical, as she also is joined by several male dancers. Her song is met with applause, as we move to the street right outside the theater.

Frank, Charley, Mary, Beth, Joe, and Frank Jr. rush onto the street, aglow with the excitement of opening night and the positive audience response. They were rushing out because Charley’s wife, Evelyn, has just gone into labor. They quickly send her in a cab to the hospital, but Evelyn insists Charley stay at the theater for their first opening night. In the excitement of opening night, Frank and Charley aspire to write more and more shows, and Joe agrees to produce them, but we all know promises made in excitement do not always come to fruition. Upon hearing the audience’s riotous applause, they sing, “It’s a Hit!” Some of their responses

---

<sup>7</sup> The Alvin Theatre was renamed The Neil Simon Theatre in 1983. Before that, it was home to several of Sondheim’s shows, including *West Side Story*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Company*, and even the original production of *Merrily We Roll Along*. So, it is befitting it is the theater referenced in this musical. (*Alvin Theatre*)

may be a bit over the top, but they rejoice in all the things they will no longer have to do, since they now have a hit show on their hands. After the song, they are all headed to the hospital, when Beth insists Frank attend the opening night party. Mary thinks Beth should attend the party too, as Gussie will be there. It is clear here Mary does not trust Gussie, but Beth trusts Frank and is comfortable letting him go alone.

As Frank heads backstage with Joe, they are met by a reeling Gussie. Joe has work to do with the backers and insists Frank and Gussie take their car to the party. It is clear when they are alone, Frank is completely smitten by Gussie, and based on Mary's recommendation, we can assume Gussie is likely to take advantage of that.

Three years later, we begin Act One, Scene Four in 1967, outside the Manhattan Courthouse. There is a divorce case going on inside, between Frank and Beth. Gussie and Joe are the first to leave the courthouse and are surrounded by reporters. They claim not to know why they have been subpoenaed and give no comment, though one could assume she has been called because of their affair. Frank's lawyer gets rid of the press so Frank can exit the courthouse without causing a scene. Mary and Charley attempt to persuade Frank to give Beth whatever she wants and get out of this divorce as quickly and cleanly as possible, but he fears losing custody of Frank Jr. When Beth comes out of the courthouse, Frank pleads to have a moment alone with her, and she obliges. She urges him to give up, as she is not out to hurt him in these divorce proceedings, but she is willing to if it comes down to it. Beth feels foolish as she was warned about Gussie. Frank asks if Beth still loves him, but she wants to know if he slept with Gussie. She then replies with the song "Not a Day Goes By." This is the same song they sang as their wedding vows, and now Beth sings it during their divorce. This version is a solo from Beth, in which she describes her day-to-day routine where she sees Frank everywhere

she goes. She feels as though she cannot get away from him, as she is constantly reminded of him. She is ready to forget him, but, until then, she feels as if she dies over and over again, day after day.

After this, Frank admits to sleeping with Gussie, and Beth believes Frank wanted to be famous so bad, he slept with Gussie. She is likely not wrong in this assumption. Beth says, “Frank, I want us to - ” (77) but she is cut off by Frank Jr’s entrance, so we cannot be sure what she was about to say. Through discussion, my students do not think she wanted to get back together with Frank but perhaps settle this divorce out of court. However, the scene is interrupted, and one of the photographers catches it on camera before Beth and Frank Jr rush out.

At this point, Frank is at his all-time low. His friends agree he needs some time to rest and relax, while Frank wants to get back to work, as this is where he finds solace. Through the song, “Now You Know,” Mary, Charley, Joe, as well as Frank’s lawyer and agent, persuade Frank to get away and put his focus on anything but work. They want him to go on a cruise and get away and assure him this is the “best thing that ever could have happened.” (80) While I am sure his team is only trying to get Frank to see the bright side of this situation, I highly disagree with this divorce being the “best thing that ever could have happened.” (80) Not only is divorce a very emotional experience for all involved, Frank’s divorce also leads him to separate with his writing partner and lose his best friends. Mary takes over the song, and basically tells Frank crap is always going to happen to you, but it is time to pick himself up and get over this setback. They end up persuading Frank to go on this cruise, have some fun, and forget about work for a little while. When he returns home from the cruise, refreshed and rejuvenated, he can make a new start, and Frank does just this.

Act One, Scene Three takes place in Frank's new Central Park West apartment in 1968. When Mary and Charley sent Frank on the cruise, they assumed it only would be for a short while, maybe a month, but Frank has just spent eight months on the cruise. For Frank's writing partner, this puts Charley out of work for eight months. The two were a hot writing team and needed to keep the momentum going, but an eight-month halt was very frustrating for Charley.

Frank first welcomes Frank Jr into the apartment, and it is clear how much Frank has missed his son. Then, the three friends are having a happy reunion. Charley and Mary have made plans for the friends to head to The Downtown Club for old time's sake, but Frank is conflicted as there is also a swanky homecoming party happening tonight at the Colony Club, where Gussie will likely be in attendance. It becomes quickly evident Frank's priorities have changed and no longer coincide with those of his friends. This is once again clear when Frank presents Charley with a contract to make their first musical, *Musical Husbands*, into a movie. Charley does not care for this idea, as he believes it would mean the two of them would be selling out, though Frank thinks he needs the money after being wiped out in the divorce. Charley thinks they just need to write more shows together to make more money. Charley is again more concerned with making a statement than with money. Mary intervenes in an effort to mediate between the two. The two calm down and remind each other they have been through a lot through the song "Old Friends." They are thankful for their old friends, as new ones come and go. At several points throughout the song, the tone gets pointed, as they each have expectations for each other, but, in the end, they laugh it off, as they are thankful to have old friends like these. After the song, the friends are interrupted by a visit from Gussie and Joe. The two are on the way to the theater to see Gussie's understudy in her show. It is mentioned in the scene that Frank and Charley have had two hit musicals, and we can assume this is the second.

Gussie is as rude and commanding as ever and mentions she has a key to Frank's apartment, as she has been decorating it for free. The others flee the room, not wanting to be around Gussie, and she is left alone with Frank. She has decided to leave Joe, though Frank advises against it, as he would feel guilty about them ruining two marriages. He agrees not to go out and wait for her phone call. The others come back, and Frank and Gussie leave in opposite directions. Mary mentions how she does not drink, and Joe calls her out for having always been in love with Frank. Mary and Charley are surprised to find out Joe knows about Frank's and Gussie's affair. Joe is okay with the two getting it out of their system, but fears Gussie leaving him. It seems Joe has been less than successful as a producer in recent years and may be hanging onto Gussie's success. The group comes together to toast Frank, and Frank breaks the news he will be staying home instead of going to The Downtown Club tonight. Gussie and Joe depart, and Mary, who is upset by this news, takes the champagne and leaves. Charley pleads for Frank to get rid of Gussie and this pathetic life, but he retorts it is none of Charley's business. The two reconcile and Frank claims he will wait for Gussie's phone call, get out of the affair, and meet them at The Downtown Club. Frank sits down at the piano and sings "Growing Up," in which he begins thankful for his old friends. He then has some internal conflict about his friends; he claims they are pushy and hotheaded, but he also realizes they are just trying to support him. His song begins to mirror the sentiment of the opening number, in which they mention sometimes our dreams change and bend as we move through life.

Frank is then interrupted by Gussie, who had the car bring her back to Frank's apartment. She feels like she could lose Frank, and so she has decided to leave Joe. She tells Frank his friends will see him tomorrow, but she needs him tonight, which is as sexual as it sounds. She then reprises the sentiments of the original "Growing Up," found in Act Two, Scene Two.

Though Gussie tells Frank to figure out what he wants and to go and get it, what she really means is she wants him to pick her. She says to ignore all the voices around her, i.e. Charley and Mary, as well as her own, and to figure out what Frank wants. However, Gussie's seduction tactics work, as usual, and she leads Frank to the bedroom, after he first stops to call The Downtown Club and tell his friends he is not coming.

Next up, is Act One, Scene Two at NBC Studios in 1973. Two news anchors mention Frank and Charley will be on the news tonight to talk about their hit film, *Musical Husbands*. This clues the audience into the fact that Frank ended up persuading Charley to make their hit musical into a movie. Mary and Charley are backstage, and we find out this appearance was Mary's idea. Frank has been off writing scores for movies, or making record deals, which means he has not been working on musicals with Charley, thus frustrating Charley further. Mary thought this would be a way for them to reconcile. She thinks if they connect again here, they will be working again in no time. Since the last scene, Mary has also taken up drinking and likely is an alcoholic at this point. Charley has grown tired of waiting and has since began writing a play on his own. Mary sings to Charley "Old Friends – Like It Was," in which she tries to remind Charley what great old friends the three of them are, and how far back they go. She then looks back on the past and wishes things could be like they were before. The song gets a bit deep, as Mary seems to be in a dark place in her life and longs for the happiness the three of them once had when they were just starting out.

After the song, Frank busts in with his entourage, and Gussie close behind. Frank and Gussie have also been married since the last scene. It is important to note here: Gussie climbed her way from Joe's secretary to a star in a show Joe was producing. She made a name for herself in several of those shows. Once she plateaued there, she found Frank and Charley, whom she

believed could write her a new and different kind of show. They did, further advancing her stardom. She starred in two of their shows, and though Joe produced those first two shows, anyone would be willing to produce shows by Frank and Charley, as they are extremely successful now. So, Gussie no longer needs Joe to help produce these shows, so she hitches herself to Frank's star now and drops Joe. She has married Frank, clinging on even harder to success.

While Charley is absent, Gussie lets Mary, and the rest of the room, know Frank has just signed a deal to produce three movies. Mary is nervous, as she does not believe Charley will handle this news well. Joe shows up at the news studio and hounds Gussie for some cash. It is clear Joe has fallen hard since Gussie divorced him. The news anchor mentions the three-picture deal in front of Charley right before they are about to be on the air. Charley is very frustrated, because he has been waiting for a long time to get back to work with Frank, and it seems as though all Frank cares about is making money at this point. Frank is worried the next musical they write will not be as good, but Charley does not care about the show being a success; he only cares if they like what they have written. The news interview begins, and Charley is extremely irritated and bitter. During the song, "Franklin Shepard, Inc.," Charley completely takes over the interview, not allowing Frank to say anything, while also making Frank out to be a money-hungry business man and not as much an artist. After slandering Frank's name, Charley attempts to take back what he has said and reconcile on the air. He wants his old friend back. After everything they have been through, Charley thinks they will be able to have a drink together, get past this, and be friends again, but, unfortunately, this time Charley has gone too far. He has destroyed Frank's character on live television and Frank will not stand for it. Charley tries to explain, but the scene ends in a full-on brawl, ending the friendship between Frank and Charley.

The very last scene, Act One, Scene One takes place in Frank's Bel Air Mansion in 1976. Everyone (except Charley) is there to celebrate the premier of Franklin's latest film, *Darkness Before Dawn*, which he produced. This party is akin to the party in Act Two, Scene Two; however, the Hollywood crowd does not form as definitive of a blob. However, the music still defines a party with its sporadic lines by random party guests. This time, however, the lines all refer to how amazing Frank is, as the song is titled "That Frank." Mary is at the party, though I am not sure Frank thought she would actually show up when he invited her. She is a fat, drunken mess at the party, saying whatever she wants to anyone who will listen. She has a conversation with Frank, in which we find out she has maintained contact with Frank Jr, but Frank has not, having not even attended his son's graduation. Frank attempts to help Mary sober up, as she is causing a disturbance at his party.

The scene all takes place on the patio of Frank's mansion, and there are several times in which Frank attempts to get the party to come back inside. We later find out it is because Gussie had been inside the whole time. She thought the party would come to her, as it always has, but apparently no one even asked her to sing like they normally do. So, Gussie definitely is feeling a lack of attention. When Gussie and Frank lived on the East Coast, Gussie was quite popular, as she had starred in a number of Broadway shows. Moving to the West Coast, Gussie has never starred in movies, so her star does not shine as brightly. However, Frank's star is still shining, as he is now producing movies on the West Coast. There is a conversation in which we find out Frank pushed for Gussie to star in his latest film, but the studio thought she was too old. And so, they cast a young new starlet, Meg Kincaid. Meg also has eyes for Frank, and we are slowly clued in to Frank and Meg's affair.



One party guest is hushed when they mention the new Charley Kringas play, which won him a Pulitzer Prize. It shows us, Frank and Charley parting ways could be the best thing to ever happen to Charley, as he might not have won the award if he were still waiting around to collaborate with Frank. The group then toasts Frank, and Mary has the last word with a really negative toast, killing the party. She leaves, but not before telling Frank he deserves all these junky people in his life, as he is just like them.

Suddenly, Meg has cut her hand. The focus of the party had not been on Meg for some time, so it was probably time to take the action into her own hands. Everyone rushes to help her clean and dress the wound, fawning over her. Gussie is unamused and sees right through the act. Frank and Gussie have it out while everyone is either inside or helping Meg. He admits to having an affair with Meg, claiming she is sensitive, kind, and keeps him grounded. Gussie ends it all when she splashes iodine into Meg's eyes. Frank's friends rush Meg to the hospital, as Gussie walks out on him. This leaves Frank alone, screaming, "WHYYYYY??!!" (29) He has officially lost it all. Frank began his journey with so much hope, promise, and a dream. He made a series of bad decisions, and though he wishes he could go back and change everything, he cannot and is left alone, as he has ruined everything with his poor life choices.

### CHAPTER 3: COMMON CHALLENGES

Stephen Sondheim's shows cover a wide assortment of subject material. What is so wonderful about his canon is that every show is different and presents a new topic to explore. No two shows cover the same themes or topics, so it becomes sometimes difficult to compare them. However, when directing pieces by Sondheim, there is a certain collection of challenges that seem to be present in a majority of his works. Here are the challenges I found when directing *Into the Woods*, *Company*, and *Merrily We Roll Along*.

One of the biggest draws to Sondheim's shows is, of course, his music. There are so many layers and intricacies to his music that captivates the audience, as well as challenges the performer. His music challenges performers in ways that no other score can. Sondheim's scores utilize very intricate harmonies layered on top of each other and can contain many dissonant chords that are difficult for the untrained ear to comprehend. Sondheim also can switch time signatures multiple times throughout a song, and while these changes are probably apparent to the most avid Sondheim enthusiast or musician, they often can seem random and out of place, coming out of nowhere. These musical challenges make these shows very difficult for young high school aged performers. The advice of my musical director for two of these three shows was to start with the hardest songs first. This allowed the students to have the most time to get the songs right. It can take some time and numerous rehearsals to get some of these songs precisely as written, so starting early definitely is in the best interest of the music director. It also is advised that you take your time and go slowly to get the pitches and rhythms correct the first time. In some rehearsal instances, you might go quickly, and students may learn the music incorrectly. They then practice this music, and it gets ingrained in their brains inaccurately.

Then, you have a very difficult time trying to re-train your students in the correct pitches and rhythms. If you just take your time and teach the music slowly and correctly, you can avoid the painstaking task of re-teaching music.

One of the other difficulties is that several of Sondheim's roles require many, if not all, of the actors to be able to hold their own vocal part without the assistance of an ensemble, while a number of other actors are also singing something drastically different. In numerous cases, all the characters are all singing different parts, so the performers have no one to follow. This is why it is important to cast self-sufficient singers who will be able to learn, rehearse, and hold their own vocal part when a member of the ensemble. Sondheim uses this layering effect to simulate several different things. In many cases, the layering of dialogue portrays everyday human dialogue. We are often cutting each other off in dialogue, as well as speaking over each other. Sondheim also layers to show that things are happening at the same time in different locations. This can often prove difficult, because the instinct is to rely on someone else to know when you need to come in. While that may work if your ensemble is completely reliable, it is not always consistent. This means the performers always need to be counting and keeping rhythm within themselves so they never miss a beat.

The most difficult layering in these three shows definitely is *Into the Woods*. There isn't really much of an ensemble in this show, and when there is, it is just to fill out those moments when everyone is singing. During the opening, the Narrator, Cinderella, Jack, Little Red Riding Hood, Baker, and Baker's Wife all layer their solo parts on top of the others. This same kind of solo layering happens again in the opening of Act 2, as well as in "Your Fault." For these difficult songs, my students found repetition the key to getting them right. They took their time in learning the correct rhythms and pitches initially, but then they would constantly run these

songs over and over, both alone and as a group. Sometimes this was instructor-led, but more often than not it was student-led. This kind of music is like a puzzle or a trick that a good musician will want to repeat and repeat until it is perfect. It is a challenge, and students enjoy this music, wanting to overcome the challenge.

The opening song, “Company,” in *Company* is very similar to the layered characters in *Into the Woods*. There are six couples, and they all begin the song offering their various salutations to Robert, so each actor again needs to be able to sing their vocal line, while all the other couples sing something different. The thing that makes “Company” a little easier is that all these individuals eventually pair up, so they do have someone else to rely on. The show is all about couples, so, of course, they would eventually sing in pairs. Also, I have never seen a production of *Company* where these couples were not physically next to one another when they sang their duet lines. Staging the couples separate from each other, while they are singing the same thing, would definitely defeat the purpose of *Company* as you would create an image of single people, rather than couples, when the point of *Company* is Robert is single and everyone else is coupled.

*Merrily We Roll Along* also has its vocal challenges necessitating strong vocalists who are able to hold their own vocal line against an ensemble. Most notably is the song “It’s a Hit!” which features five of the main characters. There is a lot of solo layering, but the most challenging section comes toward the end, when all the characters begin to sing different phrases and rhythms simultaneously. This song also requires actors to find their pitch with little assistance from the accompaniment, adding yet another challenge often found in Sondheim’s scores. “That Frank” is another song from *Merrily We Roll Along* that has a lot of solo lines interjected amongst group vocals, to demonstrate the wild cacophony of party conversation.

The vocal ranges required of the characters in these musicals present a challenge for high school performers. Specifically in *Into the Woods*, many of the characters require actors to have an entire octave and a half range. This can prove difficult to cast. Many of the men in *Into the Woods* are also high tenors, which can also be difficult to find in the average high school theatre program. The Baker and Jack reach a G4, while the Wolf tops out at G♭4. Robert in *Company* is also a tenor, but you probably should not be choosing to direct *Company* unless you know you have an actor who has the vocal range and acting chops to play Robert. Also in *Company*, Joanne's range is attainable for the average high school student; however, it may not have the weight that a woman of 45 and older might have in her voice. The voices in *Merrily We Roll Along* are attainable for high school students, as they were originally written for actors of that age.

Finally, one of the biggest musical challenges in Sondheim's scores for any actor is his repetition of musical themes. Sondheim often creates a number of musical themes for characters, plot points, and songs, and they come back sporadically throughout the duration of the score. What will often trip up even the most experienced actor is when the musical themes come back with different lyrics. Specific instances of this in *Into the Woods* are in the opening of Act One and Act Two. The opening of Act Two is intentionally meant to mirror the opening of Act One, but with a variation in lyrics. Another instance that is meant to directly reflect a repetition of behavior are the songs "Agony" and "Agony (Reprise)." In each version, these Princes are chasing after princesses and agonizing over their inability to obtain them. The near-identical repetition of this entire song means that these men are in it for the chase and that this will more than likely happen again and again. This song can be a challenge because the two versions are so alike.

In *Company*, the beginning of the opening, “Company,” features a number of salutations to Robert in a specific sequence and melody. This same sequence repeats numerous times throughout the show, each time to emphasize a new discovery for Robert, or a life-altering revelation about relationships. This becomes very difficult for most actors, but especially those of high school age, because every time this sequence comes back, there are minor differences. There is usually an adjustment in the lyrics, but, more often than not, the chords are different to give insight as to what is going on in the story, often building in intensity throughout the score. So, while they may seem like the same song over and over, they are all very different and require the music director and actors to be very diligent about noting the changes in each one. Even the overture of *Company* is a variation of this same theme only with longer note values, giving the theme a more ethereal, dream-like quality. Robert’s solos, “Someone is Waiting” and “Being Alive,” are two examples of songs that have a definite theme that is repeated within the same song but with different lyrics. This requires intense concentration on the part of the actor, as it can be easy to get lost in the middle of the song and repeat lyrics.

*Merrily We Roll Along* is similar to *Company* in the fact that it too has an opening number called “Merrily We Roll Along,” which presents us with an original theme for the whole show. There are then seven musical transitions that take us from scene to scene. Each time this song appears, it takes part of the opening number and varies it in a number of different ways: length, which verse or chorus is being sung, the number of people singing them, tempo, etc. These transitions incorporate the counting down of the years, to tell the audience what year we are beginning the next scene in. These transitions are some of the most difficult for the high school actors, because they have already learned the opening, so they think they automatically know the transitions. But, because they are all a little different, they can get messed up easily.

Student actors also think they can spend less time memorizing them because they already know the theme, but there are seven of them, and they are all different. It definitely is important to make sure your students know each and every transition and can differentiate between each one.

The subject matter found in Sondheim's musicals is often very mature for any high school actor. Characters are often tackling a number of relationship problems: they're coping with loss, there is often alcohol and drug use, and Sondheim also tends to favor some onstage intimacy. These subjects alone can often scare away a high school theatre teacher, but my students took to them more easily than I thought they would.

Relationships are a big part of any story. The highs, the lows, and everything in between are all what make up any relationship. Sondheim definitely highlights all levels of relationships, but especially the low points and the times that we do not always want to think or talk about in a relationship. Relationships are hard, and they are all different. What I love is that not a single one of the relationships in these stories is perfect all the time. A perfect relationship is not real. One of the most "true to life" relationships can be found in *Into the Woods* with the Baker and Baker's Wife. The Baker and his wife have been married for a while, and they have gotten into a routine of waking up, making bread, selling bread, and going to bed. It is a constant routine with nothing new or different in their life. They wish for a child, but they have had no success in conceiving one. Then one day, their stasis is intruded by the Witch. She explains that she put a spell on their house and they will not be able to have a child until that spell is lifted. The Witch explains she will lift the spell if The Baker and his wife find four items for a potion. So, that is what they do. That is what breaks the mundane routine that The Baker and Baker's Wife have gotten themselves into. It was important for me to explain to my students that this is something that naturally happens in relationships. Once you have been together for a long time, you get

into a routine where you wake up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, go to bed, before doing it all over again the next day. It does not mean you love your spouse any less, but it is important to consciously find things that keep the relationship exciting. For the Baker and his wife, it is this journey into the woods that is something new and exciting for them. This rekindling of their relationship is best shown in the song “It Takes Two.” In this song, they see something in each other that they have not seen in a while. The Baker’s Wife begins the song explaining just that:

BAKER’S WIFE: You’ve changed.  
You’re daring.  
You’re different in the woods.  
More sure.  
More sharing.  
You’re getting us through the woods.

If you could see –  
You’re not the man who started,  
And much more open-hearted  
Than I knew  
You to be. (Sondheim, *Woods* 73-74)

The Baker continues by saying that though he originally does not want her to come, he cannot do this without his wife. It also was important to me to focus on the partnership the Baker and Baker’s Wife create. They are a team who compliments each other very well, and this is something important for these actors to understand and portray. While they may argue and bicker, they are still there for each other. Then, with this newfound spark lit in their relationship, they resolve to embrace these new changes they have found in each other out in the woods.

They sing:

BAKER & BAKER’S WIFE: We’ve changed.  
We’re strangers  
I’m meeting you in the woods.  
Who minds  
What dangers?  
I know we’ll get past the woods.



And once we're past,  
Let's hope the changes last

Beyond woods,  
Beyond witches and slippers and hoods,  
Just the two of us –  
Beyond lies,  
Safe at home with our beautiful prize,  
Just the few of us. (75)

One of the main points of *Company* is displaying all the different relationships there are in the world and ways that people show their love for one another. Robert's journey explores the relationships of all his friends. It illustrates the highs and lows of each couple, whom are each at a different place in their relationship, and Robert is able to take something away from each couple, as he assesses relationships and marriage.

One of the most difficult to maneuver is Peter and Susan, whom have been married for several years. They have a family and are very happy and friendly with each other. We soon find out that they are getting a divorce, and, later in the play, they make it official. However, Peter and Susan have elected to continue to live together. While this is something that is not often seen or heard about in society, it does exist. But, because it is not prevalent in most high school students' lives, or seen very often in the media, this was a difficult concept for my high school students to understand. In some versions of the script, we also find out that Peter has dabbled in homosexuality. Peter says he does not identify as gay, but that he has tried it more than once. This was another concept difficult for high school students to understand. If a production is originally set in 1970, when *Company* was originally written, this is not an obscure concept at all. Sexual freedom and experimentation often was prevalent. But, nowadays, because we are farther and farther from the sexual revolution of the 1970's, this seems to be difficult for students to wrap their heads around. A lot of our society would believe that any sort

of homosexual experimentation would automatically establish one's homosexual status. But, with sexual fluidity more and more on the rise, this may be a concept that is widely acceptable in the future. However, this scene is currently not the one licensed through Music Theatre International for production, but it can be found in the published script.

Among the many different couples is Robert's three girlfriends. These relationships also are at different states: beginning, middle, and end of dating. The difficulty here is that the students playing Robert and each of the girlfriends have to imagine what the whole span of the relationship is like and be able to portray that within the parameters of the text they are given. In the instance of Robert's relationship with Kathy, she is ending their on-again-off-again relationship. They seem to have a great deal of history between each other, and they realize they would have been happy marrying, but it is too late, and she has moved on. She leaves with some words, leading us to believe this is not the first tiff they have been in.

KATHY: I'll be a good wife. I want real things now. A husband, a family. I don't want to keep running around this city like I'm having a life. (Sondheim, *Company* 57)

Things are smoothed over by the end of the scene, but Robert is left with the weight of a greatly-missed opportunity. This weight is something difficult to understand, let alone a high school student having their first try at navigating relationships.

In *Merrily We Roll Along* we get to see the full birth of a relationship through a messy divorce but backwards. This adds an interesting view of marriage and divorce. The main character, Frank, meets Beth at an audition for his revue. Several years later, they marry and have a child. Frank's success causes him to make some poor decisions, and he ends up having an affair with the star of one of his shows, Gussie. The choice Frank makes to have this affair may seem difficult for a high school student to understand. Not many high school students have

experience with cheating in a relationship, let alone a marriage, so these choices can be difficult to navigate. Beth then files for divorce and is determined to hurt Frank.

BETH: I'm not out to hurt you, Frank. But I'll hurt you if I have to. (Sondheim, *Merrily* 75)

Through her song, "Not a Day Goes By," Beth sings about all the numerous different emotions one goes through in the process of a divorce.

BETH: Not a day goes by,  
Not a single day  
But you're somewhere a part of my life  
And it looks like you'll stay.

As the days go by,  
I keep thinking, when does it end?  
Where's the day I'll have started forgetting?  
But I just go on  
Thinking and sweating  
And cursing and crying  
And turning and reaching  
And waking and dying  
And no,  
Not a day goes by,  
Not a blessed day  
But you're still somehow part of my life,  
And you won't go away.

So there's hell to pay,  
And until I die,  
I'll die day after day  
After day after day  
After day after day  
After day

Till the days go by!  
Till the days go by!  
Till the days go by! (76-77)

This song was especially difficult for my high school student to navigate. At this point in her life, it is likely she has not been through something this traumatic, but if there is something

she can draw from, she may be able to use it. The actress I had playing Beth had lost her mother, and while this definitely was something similar, I was very hesitant to have her draw on those emotions. She was a young actress with limited experience, and this was also a topic that she had never revealed to me about before. I instead chose to explore the emotions Beth is going through and what her daily routine would be like where she sees her soon-to-be ex-husband everywhere she goes. The idea of being reminded of someone everywhere you go, with everything you do, resonated with her.

As I touched on earlier, infidelity is rather prevalent in Sondheim's works. We as adults are sometimes able to look past each other's infidelities in our personal lives; or when watching a piece of theatre, we are able to understand why the character has made this decision. For whatever reason, high school students find cheating completely unforgivable. I have to think that it is because they are often looking at it from the outside. When they see cheating in a relationship, it is often in movies or on television and not necessarily in their own personal relationships. Now, I do not wish this on anyone, but I have to wonder if we as adults accept it a little more because we have experienced and dealt with it first or second hand.

In *Into the Woods*, the tryst between the Baker's Wife and Cinderella's Prince is the most shocking to my students. They have just read this lovely first act where everything ends happily ever after, and then everything goes awry in Act Two. They have followed the Baker and Baker's Wife through this story and have seen them fall in love all over again. So, when the Baker's Wife and Cinderella's Prince commit their affair, my students are all so shocked. How could she do that? And though she comes to a resolve at the end of her song, "Moments in the Woods," some students still seem to believe she gets what is coming to her.

BAKER'S WIFE: Let the moment go...

Don't forget it for a moment, though.  
Just remembering you've had an "and,"  
When you're back to "or,"  
Makes the "or" mean more  
Than it did before.  
Now I understand –  
And it's time to leave the woods. (Sondheim, *Woods* 152)

She literally says she is going to appreciate her husband after sleeping with Cinderella's Prince. I found it important to emphasize with the actor playing the Baker that he never finds out this information. An inexperienced actor could really take that information and play hurt for the rest of Act Two, and though he is grieving her loss, adding infidelity into that is something that would completely change his emotions and intentions.

Unfortunately for Cinderella's Prince, he does not really receive any sort of redemption. By the time he gets to the Baker's Wife, he has already married Cinderella and then sung a song about wanting to reach Sleeping Beauty in "Agony (Reprise)." Following his seduction of the Baker's Wife, he promptly leaves, which is pretty unforgivable on any level, and then he wants to get back with Cinderella. So, while my students had a hard time with the Baker's Wife's plight, they were able to brush off Cinderella's Prince's misgivings. It was important for my student not to play him like a complete misogynist, but to portray that ideal Prince that everyone desires. This is when his infidelity hits hardest.

In *Company*, even with all the relationships happening, there is little infidelity. Some would say that Robert is dating all his girlfriends (Kathy, Marta, April) at the same time. However, he definitely is not in any sort of committed relationship with them, so this really would not be considered cheating. Other than those relationships, the only instance of infidelity seen in *Company* is at the very end when Joann is provoking Robert.

JOANNE: When are we gonna make it?

(Pause)

ROBERT: I beg your pardon?

JOANNE: When're we gonna make it?

ROBERT: (*Making light of it*) What's wrong with now?

JOANNE: (*Slowly, directly*) There's my place. It's free tomorrow after two.

Larry goes to his gym, then right to the office. Don't talk. Don't do your folksy Harold Teen with me. You're a terribly attractive man. The kind of a man most women want and never seem to get. I'll take care of you.

(Pause)

ROBERT: But who will I take care of? (Sondheim, *Company* 108)

At this point, both Robert and Joanne have been drinking quite a bit. Joanne has given her backstory about her past, failed marriages. She sings "The Ladies Who Lunch" and proceeds to tell Robert not to bother getting married. When Joanne's husband, Larry, goes off to pay the check, Joanne stares at Robert, like a shark circling its prey. Robert squirms and rambles on, then Joanne goes in for the kill, with the aforementioned dialogue. There are several ways this scene can be interpreted. Joanne actually could want to seduce Robert, and when he asks, "But who will I take care of?" (108) Joanne has stumbled into a revelation about Robert by happenstance, as Robert has not realized it yet. Joanne also could be completely antagonizing Robert, as she does everyone in her life, and getting him to make some sort of conclusion about his life and relationships, especially since, up to now, he has not experienced infidelity. So, infidelity may be the "something new" that changes Robert's complete perspective. Whether it be either of these choices or another, this is extremely difficult content for a high school student to navigate. Joanne is risking her marriage to probe Robert. These are deep waters difficult for anyone to navigate, let alone a high school student.

In *Merrily We Roll Along*, Frank marries Beth, and though the character Gussie is prevalent throughout the beginnings of their relationship, she doesn't become a huge part of their life until Act Two, Scene Two. This is when Gussie and her husband, Joe, are having a party to

introduce the songwriting team of Frank and Charley to the arts community, also known as “The Blob.” Gussie steals Frank away to a rooftop greenhouse to talk about Frank and Charley’s music. While Frank and Charley have come to pitch a political show they have been working on for a long time, Gussie wants them to write her a fast, loud, opulent Broadway show. (Sondheim, *Merrily* 111) While this is not the type of material Frank and Charley intended to write, Gussie turns on her seduction techniques to persuade Frank to agree to it. While they do not actively engage in any intimate acts in this scene, the flirtation is heavy. It becomes very clear in the rest of the play that Frank will do whatever it takes to become rich and famous, both of which he then associates with Gussie. Gussie is the one who sets up Frank with a producer and agent, and Gussie is the star of the show, all of which represent success to Frank. So, Frank follows Gussie to that stardom, and he ends up cheating on his wife to achieve that stardom. This is what is tough about the character of Frank. He has all these irredeemable qualities that make his character very unlikable from the very beginning of the show. But, it is quite a big task to ask a student to understand why Frank would want stardom so bad that he was willing to destroy his marriage for it. He followed Gussie blindly, and it seems like a very difficult task for a high school student to be able to maneuver through these thoughts, emotions, and choices. The student playing Frank and I sat down and had a deep discussion about what people will do to be successful, as well as famous. We described what we thought success and fame were, as well as the differences between them, as fame is an interesting concept to this generation, considering the minimal things one can do to become famous with social media at our fingertips. We also got personal, and I had the student think about what they would do to become famous.

Sondheim’s characters drink alcohol – a lot. Though there is only a brief mention of wine in *Into the Woods*, *Company* and *Merrily We Roll Along* more than make up with their use

of alcohol. *Company* is all about friends hanging out with friends, and when New Yorkers convene, they drink. *Company* returns to Robert's 35<sup>th</sup> birthday party three times throughout the course of the musical, so there are three scenes right there, on top of Harry's alcoholism, as well as Joanne's overwhelming need for another Vodka Stinger. As with *Company*, there are a number of parties and social gatherings that take place in *Merrily We Roll Along*. There's a party to celebrate Frank's new movie, the group toasts with champagne to christen Frank's new apartment, there's another party when Gussie and Joe are introducing Frank and Charley to "The Blob", etc. So, there are many scenes with alcohol consumption throughout Sondheim's canon. This becomes a difficult hurdle for a theatre teacher, because most students have never had a drink, let alone know how to make and hold a Vodka Stinger. While I never mean to advertise and endorse drinking with my students, I want them to know how to do things the right way. I always strive for unique authenticity onstage, and student actors knowing how to make and hold a beverage onstage is an important skill. I take the time to give them the proper tools: an actual shaker, ice, a strainer, etc. I then give them liquids to substitute for any alcohol, and then I educate. I teach them how to make a given drink. It also is important to explain the small details and why you do the different steps. Holding the glass is a whole other technique. So often students hold empty glasses in a scene, but they look like they've never held this glass before and then their imaginary drink is sloshing all over the place. I always make sure to practice with water in their glass during rehearsal to allow students to get a feel for the weight of the liquid and how careful they need to be with their glass. Again, I find it important to emphasize that you are not condoning drinking, but that they are just learning a new skill.



## CHAPTER 4: *INTO THE WOODS*

Since 1938, *Dramatics* magazine has done a ranking of the most-produced plays and musicals in high schools each year, and since the 1990's, *Into the Woods* has always landed no lower than 13, peaking at number two. (Nadworny) Though they've only been conducting this survey for the last several years, I have a feeling *Into the Woods* has likely been in the top ten for a solid twenty or more years, making it the most produced of Sondheim's works in high schools. I, myself, played Jack in high school in 2002, and even back then, I remember several other local high schools doing it at different times.

There are a number of reasons that draw a high school theatre director to this piece. First, it contains a whole bunch of characters that most children have grown up knowing. In most cultures, there is some sort of adaptation of Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, and Rapunzel, and most of these stories even have Disney adaptations. These are characters we all grew up knowing and loving. To get to see our favorite characters intertwining in the plot of a musical can be such an interesting concept.

The main plot of *Into the Woods* is a universal one: we wish, we work toward that wish, sometimes we get it, and then we see the repercussions of getting that wish. It is human nature to wish for something. *Into the Woods* teaches us that to get those wishes, we cannot just sit around and expect those wishes to come to us, but to go out and work to achieve those wishes. Through the journeys of these characters, we see the path to our wishes is not always an easy one, and there will be a number of obstacles in our way, but it is worth it in the end. Act Two of *Into the Woods* teaches us that what we wished for may be different from what we thought we

wanted. It also shows the consequences of our actions. But one of my favorite thoughts from the beginning of Act Two is:

ALL: Wishes may bring problems  
Such that you regret them  
Better that, though,  
Than to never get them... (Sondheim, *Woods* 113)

We may have more issues once we get our wish, but it is better to have gotten that wish than not. These themes are so universally applicable, making this piece highly relatable to high school theatre students.

Just like any other show, *Into the Woods* has its own set of casting challenges. First, there is not really an ensemble written into the script. You really have your 20 named characters, and there is little room outside of that to add characters. However, in high school theatre, you often have to do that to continue to build your program and give performance opportunities to students. In our production, we had a small ensemble of about seven actors. From this ensemble, we had several understudies, the puppeteers for Milky White and the Giant, the birds, and Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, among other duties. They added several more voices to fill out the sound of the company in big group numbers, like the end of the Prologue and “Ever After.” They also assisted in the moving of set pieces and props throughout the show. If you were to add an ensemble, I would keep it small. When I was in *Into the Woods* in high school, we were a cast of about 90. Our director added seven dwarves, Hansel and Gretel, Pinocchio, basically every fairy tale character you could think of. But they were rarely in the show. They were there in the opening and closing, and I don’t remember much else between. While it is one of my favorite high school memories, I do not think I would have gotten much out of the experience if I were a random character in the ensemble.

On the converse, I understand firsthand that the number of actors in your show has a direct correlation to the number of tickets sold. The year prior to *Into the Woods*, we produced *Annie* with a cast almost double the size of *Into the Woods*, and there definitely was higher ticket sales during *Annie*. Now, I know there are numerous other factors that go into ticket sales, but I think something can be said for cast size. So, while I fully advocate doing this show, I am not sure that it is going to draw as big of crowds as a larger cast musical, due to the small number of actors. It is also not a title that draws crowds. Because it has been done so often, it is a show most people have seen at least once, but, for whatever reason, it just does not garner the same attention as something like *Hairspray*. Therefore, I recommend adding an ensemble but keeping it small and making them an active part of the storytelling. It definitely will help with ticket sales, as well as building the younger students in your department.

The characters in this cast are very dynamic and can sometimes be difficult to cast. The Witch was our most difficult casting decision. The character's vocal range tops out at a G5 and goes down to an F3. The actress needs to have the vocal chops to be able to execute the dynamic rhythms but also the chromatics throughout the piece. As well as vocal technique, your young lady also needs to be able to act the role. The Witch has moments of comedy where she giggles as she has just zapped the Baker with magic. She has moments of maternity when she is comforting and caring for Rapunzel. She gives us grief upon Rapunzel's death, but then resolve when she closes the show in "Children Will Listen." She is a very complex character and one of Sondheim's great leading ladies. With all that being said, it is a huge role for a high school actress to tackle. This was probably the most challenging casting decision in my career thus far, because we had two actresses for the role, and both brought a certain strength to the role. One actress had extensive vocal training but lacked the acting abilities, where the other was able to

give a wonderfully dynamic acting performance but lacked as much vocal training. We really challenged them during the callbacks, having the actresses sing and act a number of different songs and scenes. Finally, we decided that while the vocals definitely were important, the better actress would be able to act her way through those moments where she struggled vocally. Thankfully, I did not end up regretting my decision at all, as the actress gave me the well-rounded performance I was looking for. However, because she had less vocal experience, she did have trouble keeping her voice healthy through tech week and show week. She had to be on vocal rest often, as well as drink tea, and do a number of other things to make sure she was able to sing through the show each night. I am thankful for the music directors I had on this show who were able to assist her in keeping her vocal health through the run of the show.

Rapunzel gave us quite the challenge as well. The character of Rapunzel doesn't have a lot of lines or stage time, but there are a lot of "Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah's" that happen throughout the show. The soprano range is from an A5 to a B3, and she has to be able to navigate the range smoothly and effortlessly. However, she has a couple moments where she is pretty funny. At the top of Act Two, there is a scene where the Witch asks Rapunzel what she is doing and what is wrong with her, and Rapunzel sarcastically responds with:

RAPUNZEL: Oh, nothing! You just locked me in a tower without company for all my life, then blinded my Prince, and banished me to a desert where I had little to eat, and again no company, and then bore twins! Because of the way *you* treated me, I'll never, *never* be happy! (*She cries*) (126)

So, Rapunzel needs to be able to do a little more than just sing pretty. We had a young lady in our choir program who could sing the role beautifully. She was the obvious choice for the role; however, she hadn't really done any acting. We cast her anyway, but it did create several issues when it came to those scenes. The biggest challenge with this actress was because she was such

a trained singer looking toward a career in opera, she was hesitant to do anything that might affect the longevity of her voice. So, all the screams Rapunzel does throughout the show, specifically in “Stay with Me,” the actress was uncomfortable doing, for fear of damaging her voice. Now, I am not saying never cast an opera student in any show, but I think it is important to have a vocal instructor who will be able to coach this student into making healthy choices for their voice, within the vocal demands of the show.

In the original production of *Into the Woods* and in many subsequent productions, the roles of Cinderella’s Prince and the Wolf are doubled, giving an interesting look at the similarities between the two characters. This can be helpful if you fall into the typical high school theatre lack of boys. If you have enough boys, I definitely suggest splitting the roles to allow more opportunities for your performers. The Wolf is dead within the first thirty minutes of the show, but he has a pretty memorable song and can change costumes to be a part of the ensemble for the rest of the show. When doubling, the trick is finding an actor versatile enough to play the debonair charm of Cinderella’s Prince but also the commitment to being an animalistic, predatory Wolf. At our callbacks, we had a young man who was willing to fully commit to the Wolf, but he just did not have the swagger to woo Cinderella, The Baker’s Wife, and the audience. My mistake was casting him as the Wolf and *Rapunzel’s* Prince. I figured either Prince could do it, without bothering to look at the script. What messes this plan up is *Rapunzel’s* Prince’s very first appearance onstage. He appears at Rapunzel’s tower, sees her and proclaims that he will soon return to woo her. It is only one line, but it sets up this character’s entire goal for Act One. Very shortly after, we have the infamous scene in Granny’s House where the Wolf eats Little Red Riding Hood. We were able to execute this with the help of some

very fast quick changes, so I am not saying it cannot be done. I am just saying that I would avoid it if at all possible.

As for the other roles in the show, you need to make sure you have actors for them before you choose to produce this show. With a lot of shows, you mentally cast those one or two lead roles and know you will be able to fill in the rest as needed. Unfortunately, this is not a show where you can just hope people will show up for the very specific, vocally and emotionally demanding roles. Each character goes through an extensive character arc, and you need to have actors who are emotionally ready and able to show that journey and growth. I definitely would make sure to scout out who is auditioning and where you might be able to place them in this cast prior to choosing it, as did I.

Most productions of *Into the Woods* are set in a non-descript fairytale world. They take from Medieval Times, the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, etc. because these fairytales have existed all throughout history. This gives the director and costume designer the opportunity to pick and choose. It is important, however, to be decisive about what you are choosing from what time period for fear of your production looking like it lacks direction. I have seen the traditional fairytale production numerous times, which is great and has its own set of challenges. However, as a director, I never like to do a show the same way I have seen it many times before. I always strive to be different, either with my production concept or choice of show. There is nothing wrong with the original interpretation, as that is what people have come to expect. However, I was so inspired by Timothy Sheader's modern reimagining of the show, I decided to take a similar approach.

Timothy Sheader is the artistic director of Regent Park's Open Air Theater in London and had directed *Into the Woods* there in 2010, which won him the Olivier Award for Best Musical

Revival. Because of the success of this production, Sheader was asked to re-direct *Into the Woods* at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park for the Public Theater. (“Our History”)

Shader’s production completely transformed the piece. First, he cast a modern day, young boy as the Narrator, and thus the world of the musical was created from this young boy’s imagination. The musical began with a voiceover of a boy (Narrator) and his father (Baker) arguing, and the Narrator runs onstage with sleeping bag and toys in tow, as he has run away and is camping out. The gorgeous set design by John Lee Beatty and Soutra Gilmour resembled a child’s tree house, but with many different levels, platforms, and staircases, with a giant nest at the very top, representing Rapunzel’s tower. As the Narrator unpacks his toys, he begins to play out the story of the musical, while the actors come to life all around him, portraying what he is creating within his imagination. Emily Rebholz also gave these classic characters a modern makeover, so the characters more so resembled people the Narrator has in his life. (Brantley)

This was a concept that refreshed and excited me, as well as my cast. It allowed us to make the show more current and relatable to our high school audiences.

For an *Into the Woods* set, there are not a lot of requirements. The most important thing is space. The majority of this show takes place (appropriately) in the woods at a number of different locations. Each act is a continuous stream of moments in the woods; one character meets another, they help one another on their quest for their wish, and then they move on. The set needs to allow this to happen. One of my biggest requests as a director was for a number of different playing areas: levels, platforms, spaces, places for people to enter and exit. Along with the set designer, this brought us to the idea of making a stationary structure that resembled a child’s treehouse and playground. There were branches all over the set, ladders, stairs, a number

of platforms, a faux drawbridge, and even a swing. It was playful and allowed me to represent the numerous meeting locations throughout the woods.

Three of the trademark locations are the three houses of Cinderella, Jack, and The Baker and his Wife, which we visit at the very beginning of Act One and Act Two. There are some subtle changes required of these houses from Act One to Act Two: Cinderella moves from her home to the palace; Jack's home gets improved in Act Two because he's wealthy now; and The Baker's home gets crowded with baby accoutrement. Many previous productions have created these three structures by building actual houses, or house backdrops/flats, but it is okay to just have specific areas delineated from one another by lighting and space within the playing area. We did the latter, using different level platforms to represent each of the houses, but not having any sort of backdrop to represent these houses. I do suggest placing Cinderella's house stage right, Jack center, and the Baker's house stage left, as that is the order in which we always meet these characters, and that is the direction in which audience members' eyes scan naturally.

The last, and trickiest, requirement is a tower for Rapunzel. This can be a bit challenging, because an actress needs to be seen physically in the tower, while another actress climbs the tower. As in the typical story of Rapunzel, the Witch calls for Rapunzel to let down her hair. She does so and then the Witch climbs the hair to make her entrance into their little home. What I see in productions most often, and what we ended up doing, is the Witch pretends to begin "climbing" the hair before the lights go out before anyone can see her actually climb anything. If you create a tower on a rotating platform, you also can rotate the tower while the Witch attempts to climb the hair, getting her upstage of the tower before she actually gets anywhere. If I had an unlimited budget, I would create a thick, strong rope for climbing, similar to something you would find in gym class. I would then cover it in tracks and tufts of hair to



make it look like an actual braid, then attach that to the set so the Witch actually can climb it. I would then have a braid of hair connecting from Rapunzel to the rope attached to the set. This would give the desired illusion and allow the Witch actually to climb the tower, without causing any harm the actress playing Rapunzel. However, you also would need to make sure the tower was weighted down, as not to tip when the Witch begins to climb it with all her bodyweight. You can also represent the tower in a number of different ways, by either creating an actual tower, or as in our production, the tallest 4' x 4' platform of the treehouse was the "tower" and Rapunzel let her hair down from that platform into the playing area below.

The Rapunzel wig also is probably the most difficult costume piece to acquire for this show. Besides the aforementioned challenges with having to climb this hair, Rapunzel's hair has a bunch of different phases. We first see her in the tower with her long hair. The Baker's Wife needs to be able to rip part of this hair off the braid, which can be simulated by attaching a small track/tuft of hair to the longer braid. It can even be indicated with a small ribbon, so the Baker's Wife knows exactly where to pull the hair. The Witch also needs to be able to "cut" the long braid off, leaving Rapunzel with short hair. The wig we rented had a hook at the end of the long braid which attached to the back of the wig on Rapunzel's head. During "Stay With Me," the Witch found a moment to unclip it right before she "cut" it off with giant (dull) hedging shears. Thankfully, her hair does not need to change colors, a la Disney's Rapunzel, but Rapunzel does have a shorter haircut throughout the rest of the show. It is open to interpretation as to how long you would like Rapunzel's hair to be for the rest of show, whether it be shoulder length or pixie cut. Enough theaters have produced *Into the Woods* that you should not have a hard time finding someone from whom to borrow and rent this wig.

The Witch's costume may be a little easier to acquire than Rapunzel's wig, but it has a similar number of requirements. The challenge with The Witch's costume is that she is old and ugly in the first act and young(er) and beautiful in the second act, with a quick costume change at the end of Act 1. There are a number of ways to costume both versions of The Witch, but some things to consider are that The Witch needs to be able to sing in whatever mask you give her, gesticulate in whatever gloves or cloak she's wearing, potentially climb stairs or platforms, and maybe even climb hair in this costume. Making sure this costume is not too cumbersome or restricting is very important, considering the magnitude of this character. In our production, our Act One Witch carried vine-wrapped elbow crutches. We made sure to give these to the actress early in the production process so she was able to adjust to them. It did create several challenges with the number of times she had to go up and down stairs, but it definitely gave the earthy, tree-like quality I was looking for. We also elected to use a half-mask for the Act One Witch, leaving the actress's chin fully exposed. This gave the actress full freedom to move her mouth and did not cause any problems with audibility. To facilitate the transition from ugly Witch to pretty Witch, we utilized a series of snaps down the front of The Witch's cloak. The Witch has some time offstage after she blinds Rapunzel's Prince until she has to come back onstage for the third midnight and potion change. Cinderella sings "On the Steps of the Palace," and the Baker's Wife acquires the slipper as pure as gold, all while The Witch is offstage. She has this time to underdress her pretty Witch costume under her ugly Witch costume. Then, after she drinks the potion, she runs upstage or offstage, takes off the cloak, mask, and wig and comes back as the pretty Witch. If she is already underdressed, it should be a pretty smooth transition. Attached to our ugly Witch mask was also a gross, nappy wig, so it managed to cover the pretty Witch wig underneath as well. I have also seen this change happen onstage, which can be somewhat tricky,

as there is a lot that can go wrong and the actress is in complete view of the audience. Another tricky option I have seen is to give The Witch a body double. After the Witch blinds Rapunzel's Prince, she would go offstage and change into the pretty Witch. When The Witch comes out for the third midnight, it would be the body double. The actress playing The Witch would either need to say her lines live during her quick change, with the body double lip-syncing them, or her lines would be prerecorded, and the sound technician would play them in-time with the scene. The latter seems like the better option, because one could get very distracted during a quick change and drop a line and prerecording them would also give the body double some consistency. The body double would complete the whole scene, drink the potion, and then move either upstage or offstage for The Witch switch. The real Witch would come out with the same cloak over the pretty Witch costume. The body double and the actress playing The Witch would then switch places and the real Witch would remove the cape, revealing the pretty Witch. I think this seems like a good option if you are doing a full mask, hair and makeup for the ugly Witch, or if you decided to include prosthetics in the ugly Witch makeup. This would give the actress much more time to take off her costume and makeup and put some nice makeup on for the pretty Witch. It does mean your sound technicians will have to do a little more work, and you will need two Witch's cloaks and costumes, but if you need the time, the extra work will be worth it.

One last character to pay attention to is The Wolf. He can be as realistic or as abstract as you want him to be. The original production had a full wolf face, but then also a prosthetic six pack and hairy cod-piece. The cod piece is incredibly disturbing, and I do not recommend it, especially at the high school level. The movie version had Johnny Depp in a zoot suit, and Timothy Sheader's Wolf was more of a grunge-rock biker with tons of fur dripping from his shoulders down. The more human-like you make your Wolf, the creepier the scene becomes,

because the audience sees a human preying on a little girl. Where if the Wolf looks more like an animal, the audience is able to buy into the Little Red Riding Hood fairytale more. But you can really go in a number of different directions when costuming this character.

As far as the rest of the costuming needs, there is nothing too out of the ordinary, and it also depends on what time period in which you want to set your production. If you go with traditional theming, it may be a little difficult to find the middle age and medieval costumes, but most costume rental companies are likely to have something that would fit all the characters within that style. You can really dip into as many different time periods as you like because it is so wildly fanciful. Because our production was more modern, it allowed us to acquire costumes a little easier, while still giving hints to the original fairytale time periods.

Milky White is a character who lives in a weird prop/costume/actor/puppeteer category, because she can be manifested in so many ways. The original production utilized a prop cow, which was able to be picked up with ease, it had a handle that added a comedic bit, and even had a mechanism allowing it to fall over for her death. The 2002 Broadway Revival implemented a man in a fully costumed cow suit, which allowed the actor to give the cow more emotion and feeling than the original inanimate object. Timothy Sheader's production used a cow puppet. The body of the cow looked like it was made of sticks, to give a thin, sickly appearance, and it had a long strap so the puppeteer could "wear" it. The head was more realistic-looking, held and manipulated by the puppeteer. The puppeteer also was able to convey Milky White's emotions through his movements, as well as his own face, as it was fully visible. I love this option, but only if you have someone to teach the skill of puppeteering. This is a special skill and not something that just happens when you simply pick up the puppet. With that being said, all

options are great and work equally well; you just have to choose which is right for the skillset of your theatre department.

As previously mentioned, the subject material is generally family-friendly, but it does contain some adult content. The interactions with The Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood are specifically difficult to navigate due to the nature of the writing. The verbiage Sondheim has selected is overtly sexual in nature. His innuendos of seduction, molestation, and even pedophilia do not go unnoticed by even the youngest of readers. Amongst the current political climate, this can be a difficult scene to traverse. It seems the more perverse sections are when we get a look into the Wolf's inner dialogue.

WOLF: Look at that flesh,  
Pink and plump.  
(*To himself*)  
Hello, little girl...  
Tender and fresh,  
Not one lump.  
Hello, little girl...  
This one's especially lush,  
Delicious...  
Mmmh... (28)

In fact, in the truncated *Into the Woods, Jr.* script, those sections are completely omitted. The song is pared down only to the interactions between the Wolf and Little Red, thankfully removing the overtly sexual sections of the song. However, in the full version, it is all there for you to direct, and that it is up to the director to assess the political climate at their school and know how far they can and want to go with this scene. The thought that eases my mind is this is an actual Wolf, not a man, although it is being portrayed by a man. This is the type of inner dialogue a wolf would have, were it preparing to devour its prey. When directing, I made sure to be very candid with my actors about what was going on between these characters and the

innuendo that had been written into the text. We had a conversation about what this meant and how it made each of them feel. As I said before, I had an actor as the Wolf who was bold enough to take on this role, and he did a great job creating a creepy Wolf without going too far and disturbing the audience. This song may be uncomfortable for some, but it is a part of Little Red Riding Hood's story, which has been around for centuries.

Thankfully, all the fairytales involved in this story and the happily-ever-after's make up for the level of adult content. There is a reason why *Into the Woods* is the most-produced of Sondheim's musicals in high schools. The material is the most accessible as it is compiled of stories we all know and love, and if you have the right set of singers and actors, it is a great choice for any department. You can go as elaborate as you like with the costumes and setting, and there is little to no choreography. So, it allows you to really dive into the delicious book that James Lapine has written alongside Sondheim's brilliant songs.

## CHAPTER 5: *COMPANY*

I directed *Company* during my seventh year of teaching. Whenever I mention it, I am usually met with, “You directed *Company* in a *high school*?? Wow.” This always gives me great pride, but I understand why one might say this: many revere *Company* as a very deep, meaty, complex piece of theatre, and unfortunately, those same people do not think high school students have the capability of successfully producing such a piece. But I believe differently.

I have always had an affinity for *Company* upon hearing the opening song my junior year of high school at a theatre competition. I later had the pleasure of taking on the role of Robert, but never gave a thought to directing it, especially not at a high school. The year before producing *Company*, I had a young man in my program who was really beginning to blossom. He had just wowed audiences with his captivating performance of Boy (Peter) in *Peter and the Starcatcher* at the Florida State Thespian Festival and he was becoming a very strong, intellectual performer. He was a very thoughtful young man, and you could tell he really understood what his character was going through. He was a great listener and always applied his notes. He was a very smart actor. I thought he might connect with Robert and might enjoy studying a piece like *Company*, so I gave him the script and told him to read it. Upon his reading, there were several occasions where we would sit down and discuss the characters, the outline of the musical, what the piece was saying, all the types of discussions you love to have with a student when discussing a script. He definitely got it and connected to the script, as I had hoped. It was then that I started to ask myself, “*Could* we do this show??” It seemed like such a ridiculous idea to me at the time. Most of these characters are double the age of my students, so I assumed they would not understand or connect to the characters and plot. I knew I loved this

show, but would my students? These are the questions constantly flowing through a theatre teacher's head when choosing a show. What I learned with this show is you often just have to test the material out on your students. You can have them read the script, play them some of the music, or let them watch video clips of the show. I can tell so much about how my students will feel toward a piece when I share it with them. They will either connect with it or not. Toward the end of that school year, we were doing scenes and songs in our musical theatre class. I decided to give this young man the Robert, Joanne, and Larry scene and the song "Being Alive," which I thought to be the most difficult material in the show. I knew if they were able to deliver touching, believable performances in this classroom scene, we have a possibility of successfully producing the show. This was also my chance to test out a Joanne. She and Larry are the two oldest characters in the show, and I needed to make sure I had someone who could play Joanne, as well as someone who could play Robert. As expected, these students put in so much time and energy to get this scene and song just right. I worked with the three students to fully understand these characters. We talked about what they needed to do to project an older character onstage. Their final scene performance gave me great hope.

Still slightly unsure, we had some time at the end of the school year to read and discuss a play in my musical theatre class. I suggested reading and listening to *Company* and the class seemed rather excited, so we did. What I love about Sondheim's works is you can discuss them for hours on end, and even upon a third or fourth reading, you are still finding new connections and themes. This is exactly what happened during those final weeks of class. We explored each of Robert's relationships, we discussed divorce and how it not only affects the couple, but the relationships of those around them, and we talked about the need to love *somebody*, not just *somebody*. It was enlightening for all of us, and it was the insightful conversation every teacher



dreams of having. It was then I knew we had to do this show. They loved the piece as much as I did, and I knew they were going to be willing to work as hard as I was going push them to make this show the best it could be.

In my career, I have learned this one thing many times, and I continue to learn it again and again: if you are passionate about something, your students will be too. I love *Company*, so my passion shines through me whenever I speak about it or work on a piece from this show. Students see this and begin to love it too. They want to make the piece just as great as I want it to be. They want to make you proud.

Two years prior to *Company*, we had begun producing a full musical in our musical theatre class. When I was in high school, this is how we produced musicals. We only rehearsed in the musical theatre class, with a couple of after school rehearsals closer to show time. However, we were on block schedule, so our periods were about an hour and a half long each day. You are able to get a lot done in that amount of time. Unfortunately, I do not currently teach with a block schedule, so our rehearsal time is about forty-five minutes a day. The year prior to *Company* we produced *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*, which was the perfect musical for this short rehearsal period, as the scenes are very short and do not require a lot of discussion or character development and relationships. *Company* is similar to *I Love You . . .* because both are compiled of several smaller scenes or vignettes. However, the characters in *Company* are much more dynamic and have more problems and connections than the ones in *I Love You . . .* During the rehearsal process with *I Love You . . .* I was able to block a scene and run it a couple times all in the span of our forty-five minute class period. This was not the case with *Company*. There was so much to talk about, between Robert's journey, what he was gaining from each couple, and how the characters felt about each other, making it difficult to

have these necessary discussions, plus block and run the scene enough times to make the cast felt comfortable.

For *Company*, we began the audition process the third week of school. This lasted about a week and a half, and we promptly started rehearsals afterwards. It was unbelievably early in the school year to begin the casting process, but after creating a full rehearsal calendar of the show, this was how much time I estimated it was going to take, with the show slated to open the second week of February. We did take about one day a week to work on competition pieces, but otherwise, we were constantly working hard to get this show just right. What is baffling to me is, even with all the rehearsal time, student feedback was still a call for more rehearsal time. I was extremely thorough when compiling the rehearsal schedule, but I could have been more thorough and concise during daily rehearsals. With such limited time each day, it is important for a director to know exactly what they want and have a clear and crisp view for how they want things. There is not a lot of time to play in rehearsal, find things organically, or change things a number of times. There have been rehearsals where I decide to “wing it” and find things organically, and it always takes ten times longer than if I actually had done my homework and came to rehearsal prepared. If I want my students to come to rehearsal prepared, I should give them the same respect and come to rehearsal prepared myself. There is a time and place for an organic rehearsal process; it just seems difficult when your time is so short each day.

The first two years we did a musical theatre class musical, we performed them in proscenium setup, but because they were smaller musicals, with smaller sets and casts, we closed the mid-traveler, cutting the playing space in half. I believed this would bring the show closer to the audience, giving a more intimate feel. Unfortunately, what I began to notice was when people enter our theater and sit in a proscenium setup, they have become accustomed to seeing a

big, elaborate stage production. When, in fact, the musical theatre class musical is meant to be the opposite. The musical theatre class musical is meant to be more of an educational, informal theatre experience. It gives our students an additional credit on their resume, as well as work on their acting skills, without the pressure of the main spring musical. With *Company*, I came up with an idea to really immerse the audience in this educational world we are in by bringing the audience onstage. We created a series of platforms downstage, as well as stage left and stage right, on which we placed chairs for the audience members. This gave the space a thrust setup, with a black box feel. No seating was in the house, just 98 seats onstage. This was an experience unlike any our patrons had experienced before. This also was an amazing learning experience for my students, as well as myself. Acting and directing in thrust is very different from proscenium, as you have to constantly think about all three sides of the audience. I was constantly trying to create different pictures in formations to continue involving all sides of the audience. It took a lot of coaching of my actors, as they all only had experience acting in proscenium. This also gave our technicians a number of challenges. Our lighting students specifically had a hard time lighting the different areas onstage without flooding the audience members with light as well. We also received really great feedback from our audiences about the setup. Everyone seemed to really enjoy the intimacy of it, which I agree with wholeheartedly. *Company* is already such an intimate show with these small vignettes of three-person scenes. In thrust, the audience was really able to see the actors' faces and emotions. There is not really a bad seat in this space, as everyone is so close. This show is perfect for an imitate thrust and/or black box space, and we have loved it so much, our musical theatre class musical is always in this setup now.

Producing a musical theatre class musical also has allowed us to be a little bolder with our musical title choices. When you are only producing one musical a season, this being your main spring musical, you have to be careful with what you choose. It usually needs to be something that will draw a crowd, sell tickets, and be somewhat family friendly. But, when we began to produce musical theatre class musicals, we were able to choose smaller, lesser known shows. Choosing these pieces has become more about student journey and growth and less about selling tickets. What is also great about only 98 seats is when you only do three performances, you are likely to always sell out! So, while I love *Company* and do not regret choosing to produce it at all, it is a musical I chose because I had this venue. I do not think *Company* would work as the singular main spring musical in your season. It is not a show that is going to draw crowds in a high school; it is a small cast of fourteen, and it is extremely minimalistic. The script does not call for a lot of sets, costumes, and glitz. It is meant to be about the acting and you would have a hard time selling this as the one musical you do in your season. However, it is a brilliant choice for your smaller musical theatre class musical, or something similar.

Once we had decided to produce *Company* as our musical theatre class musical, we had one last step: principal approval. After being called down to the principal's office for use of the word "bitch" in *Bring It On: The Musical*, we thought it wise to meet with our principal prior to announcing our season each year. Thankfully, I have always been lucky enough to have a principal who supports me, my department, and the shows we produce. They have never denied us (knock on wood), but always want to know what the shows are about and the content material. With *Company* it was important we discuss the adult themes of this show, the intimacy between Robert and April, as well as all the drinking. We were able to assure this principal we would do it all tastefully, and it helped that we were able to ensure them it was going to be an intimate

audience of just friends and family, due to the limited seating. It was sure to be an audience of people who understood the piece and would not be too shocked by the subject matter. Speaking to my principal is still such a scary meeting for me, but I came into the meeting prepared with my talking points, and the confidence I had within myself manifested into my principal's confidence in me.

One production I took a lot of inspiration from was the 2006 Broadway Revival, directed and choreographed by John Doyle. In this production, where the actors played all the instruments, a grand piano was placed in a central location on the stage, and everyone was dressed in blacks, whites, and greys. I had seen a production of *Company* at the University of Miami while I was still in high school, but the 2006 Revival is the one ever-present in my head because of how astonishing the instrumentation was, as well as it being the first production of *Company* on film.

In costuming our show, I definitely wanted it simple and clean, but instead of gradients of black and white, I decided to clothe my cast in all black. It was simple, streamlined, and easy to shop for. For each of the five couples, they were given an accent color. This allowed the couples to be easily identifiable. You would see Harry with a red belt and Sarah with a red headband and know they were a couple. Paul's yellow tie matched Amy's yellow heels and the girlfriends all coordinated with accents of purple. To help Robert stand out, he was suited in grey. The entire cast was in black which is a more definitive color, where Robert was in grey, a color that is close to black, but has not quite gotten there yet, which matches Robert's journey to love and relationships.

As in the 2006 Revival, our set was also very minimalist. Our accompaniment was provided by a grand piano upstage center, and each couple's apartment was delineated by how

their furniture was set up. Our department invested in a full-size couch, an armchair, two smaller dining room chairs, all in black leather, as well as a small side table and black coffee table. This has proved a sound investment, as we have used these pieces in numerous shows since *Company*. It definitely was furniture I could see in Robert's bachelor pad, but also gave a sleek New York apartment look to the set. Because this was going to be our only set pieces, it was important to me they look nice and appropriate to the show, which they did. For each scene, when we would move into another couple's apartment, these furniture pieces would be rearranged in a new formation to represent that couple's aesthetic. We would add accessories and other props as needed for each scene as well. Any and all props matched that couple's accent color on their costume. The aforementioned Sarah and Harry also had black coffee cups with a red glaze inside, which sat on a red tray, and the brownies were served on a red plate. Jenny and David's floor was scattered with numerous children's toys we had spray painted green. One of my favorite touches was Robert's gray water bottle he toted in one scene. Everything was carefully chosen to either match the all-black or give an accent of color as it related to each couple. These details created a clean and sophisticated look the show.

*Company* was the first time we had used live accompaniment for our musical theatre class musical. We normally use a pit comprised of professionals and students for our main Spring musicals and tracks for our musical theatre class musical because of budget. For *Company*, I really wanted to improve production value, and I thought a live grand piano accompaniment would do just that. For rehearsals, we used accompaniment tracks and then our professional pianist joined us two weeks prior to opening. This added an additional production cost, but I think it made things move more smoothly through the process and it sounded beautiful. We made sure to schedule a sitzprobe prior to tech week, which was completely

necessary. One thing this helped me realize is my students are not used to singing and having an accompanist follow them. They are solely used to following a track, so this was an interesting learning experience. Often, we had to tell our students to push through at the tempo they were used to, as they were constantly attempting to slow down. This taught me this is a different skillset my students are not strong in. They need training in pushing an accompanist at the tempo they want and setting a tempo from the beginning of the song. This skill is immediately applicable in audition settings, as they are having to set a tempo with their accompanist and sticking to it.

Also, like the 2000 Broadway Revival, I directed Robert to play “Being Alive.” Throughout the show, Robert is worried about those around him, and I see “Being Alive” as the song where he finally takes control of his life and what he wants. I thought this would be a great opportunity for Robert to take over at the piano. I mentioned it to the actor and he gladly took on the challenge. He had some basic piano experience and was supplemented by some instruction from our school’s piano teacher. His nerves got the best of him when the pressure of tech week was upon him, but with some instruction from our music director, as well as our accompanist, he was able to play with ease. He played about half of the song before the accompanist took over, as the song got a little more challenging to play and I wanted Robert to be able to move around the space to vary the song some. Because we were in thrust, the stage right audience would only see Robert’s back while he was sitting at the piano, so I wanted to get him up from the piano, so they could get a better view of Robert’s revelation.

Casting *Company* did not seem overly difficult in retrospect. Like *Into the Woods*, it is important to make sure you have several options for Robert and Joanne. While the other characters are equally as important, Robert is the character driving the show. He has several

solos and is the central character. Joanne is another one of Sondheim's famous leading ladies. She sings musical theatre favorite, "The Ladies Who Lunch," as well as "The Little Things You Do Together," so after Robert, she is the next character with the most stage time. Her character also commands attention; she is strong, but also shows a softer side in her scene with Robert. You need to make sure you have the actress to command the role. The great thing about the rest of the couples and girlfriends is they are in one scene that truly defines their character and relationship, and as dynamic as these characters are, George Furth also has left a really blank slate in the writing of these characters. They each allow you to really pour yourself and add your own nuance to each character. This is due strongly to the fact there is a little bit of each of us in all these characters. I loved discussing the show with parents afterward because they could see little bits of their relationship in each of the different couples. In casting these couples, it really came down to chemistry between each couple and what they brought to each character.

As with *Into the Woods*, there is no ensemble written into the show. In fact, in the libretto after the list of characters, it blatantly says:

Please note: ROBERT is the only member of the company who doesn't double.  
The remaining thirteen members of the company each have a particular character to play, as well as doubling as COMPANY.  
There is no dancing or singing ensemble. (Sondheim, *Company* iii)

A fourteen-person cast obviously does not work when you have a class of 33. So, against the will of Mr. Sondheim and Mr. Furth, I added a small ensemble to the company. This ensemble also was understudies for the couples. I added the ensemble into the end of "Company," there were additional boys in "Have I Got a Girl For You," they were New Yorkers in "Another Hundred People," and they were in "What Would We Do Without You?" The ensemble filled out the sound on these tricky Sondheim chords. One of my favorite parts of the show was the



very beginning: the overture is a series of “Bobby’s” sung slowly by the company, while Robert got home from work, made himself a drink, and sat down to listen to his voice messages. We placed the company behind each of the onstage seating sections, which gave a very creepy, ethereal sound. The additional number of students made this possible, as well as gave a cleaner sound. This show also moves seamlessly from one location to another without blackouts, so you need to be able to transition from one apartment setting to the next quickly and the added ensemble allowed us to do this.

During this rehearsal process we had a lot of negativity floating around backstage. Thankfully, none of it made its way onstage, but I think it is worth noting. There were several actresses who were cast in the ensemble or as understudies, and it was clear they were unhappy with this. While a lot of it had to do with these actresses not appreciating the experience they were getting, I want to take some of the blame here as well. It is very difficult for actors to keep interested in a piece when they are in a limited number of scenes. Most of *Company* is focused on Robert, his friends, and girlfriends, so I can understand how one might feel slighted when you are not a part of this group. The majority of the rehearsal process was spent with those characters and minimally with the ensemble as a whole. As a high school theatre director, I have learned the importance of making everyone feel like they are important. I do not get a lot of negativity in my program, but instances like this may have been curbed had I made the ensemble feel more a part of the show. This is also why there is a direction in the libretto discouraging an ensemble. It can cause conflict within the cast and crew. It really puts a high school theatre director in a precarious situation. You want to do this show, but there is no ensemble, do you add it or not? Most will find success in adding an ensemble, but I would advise giving them as much stage time as you can, and just a little extra love so they know they are appreciated. And I

will add, the 2011 New York Philharmonic staging of *Company* with Neil Patrick Harris utilized several ensemble cast members to fill out the sound, as well as move set pieces. So, if Lonny Price can break the rule, you can too.

I had a personal challenge when choreographing this show. I had listened to and watched *Company* so many times and built our production up so much in my mind, I could not choreograph anything. In my head, nothing was good enough. Everything had to be absolutely perfect for this production, choreography included, so it basically paralyzed me from creating. I generally choreograph in order, so “Company” was the first thing to do. It took me a lot of time, but I just finally had to start with something. Anything. It did not matter if it was good or bad, I just had to set something. Afterwards, I was finally able to work through the rest of the song and then was able to go back through what I had done and adjust anything that did not seem right. It helped me to look at the structure of the song to see when the cast was singing in couples, when Robert was singing alone, when they sang as a company, etc. I was then able to think about what each of those moments made me feel. The beginning of the song is more about the couples talking *at* Robert, then Robert has a solo, and following the solo, Robert then begins to engage with the different couples. They ask him for favors, ask for advice, schedule dates, etc. and Robert responds accordingly. This section felt like a flurry of activity and so I made sure the staging gave a similar feeling. It also helped me not to have to start at the beginning of the song. At times, it is often easier to jump to the sections of the song that speak to you and then fill in the parts in-between. Sometimes those in-between parts can end up being a transition or formation change to the next section you already choreographed. Also, in the opening, it became difficult to have all 33 actors onstage at the same time. With the audience also onstage, it minimized our

dance space, so 33 really filled the space. Everyone had room to dance, but we would not have been able to fit many more without it looking crowded.

“You Could Drive a Person Crazy” was a bit easier to choreograph because it was only the three girlfriends. I have a lot more experience choreographing cute, sassy girl numbers a la The Andrews Sisters, so this choreography came a little more naturally. This also was a song where I was able to have the girls travel all around the space. In the different sections of the song, they traveled from facing the stage left audience, moved and dance in front of the center section, they circled Robert and danced in front of the stage right audience, before ending center stage. It was a really nice number giving all sides of the audience a little attention. “Have I Got a Girl for You” did not prove difficult either, as it is a short song with all guys. High school boys do not often have much dance training, so I kept this choreography simple and fun, while in the style of a drinking song.

“Side by Side by Side/What Would We Do Without You?” is the only other big group number. I kept the first part, “Side by Side by Side,” as just the couples, and then brought on the entire company for “What Would We Do Without You?” This made “Side by Side by Side” a lot easier, because it was less people to worry about. This song also is a lot slower than “What Would We Do Without You?” so I was able to incorporate a lot of walking patterns and moments where the actors would just stand and sing. “What Would We Do Without You?” wasn’t as easy. Just like the opening, I got stuck on this number because I wanted it to be spectacular. It was one of the two big numbers in the show, both of which gave me pause. I had seen this song performed a number of different ways: The 1995 London Revival at the Donmar Warehouse made this song a cocaine-induced dance routine. The 2006 Revival played on the actors with instruments and gave the song a marching band feel, at one point carrying their

instruments around the space in a line. The 2011 New York Philharmonic concert version used boater hats and canes to give a showbiz look, as well as a number of different circus tricks during one of the dance breaks. The circus and marching band references make sense, as there is a dance break with a big marching band feel utilizing a number of brass instruments. Once I started to think more about this marching section, an idea came to me: Robert is this guy everyone loves being around, a man around campus. We meet three girlfriends, so he is definitely popular with the ladies. Well, in a high school, this might be the star of the football team. So, even though my Robert was 5'6" and super skinny, we used "What Would We Do Without You?" to turn him into a campus hero. There was a section in which Robert was given a football and proceeded to run the field, tackling all the guys on his way. After this, there was a slow-motion celebratory parade where Robert was hoisted onto the shoulders of two company members. Other cast members carried 12" cut outs of Robert's face, while one lucky cast member followed behind with a giant three-foot-tall cut-out of Robert's face. This then gave way to the cheerleader section, when several ladies came out with pom-pom's and led a cheer spelling out Robert's name. It was all very fun and frantic, and embodied all the elements of a high school football game. But the song still left Robert feeling lonely, when at the end all the couples paired off and left him alone. So, even his football stardom could not fill the void of a relationship. It was an incredibly different take on the song that was relevant to my high school students and also got the message across.

In the grand scheme of things, the choreography demands of *Company* can be as minimal or extensive as you wish. I love dance and choreography, as do my students, so I like to give them as much dance as I can. However, you definitely could do this show with little to no choreography. This music is difficult and, depending on the skills of your students, it may

behoove you to simplify the choreography. There are a number of transitions where I gave my students some formation changes, then they would stand and sing. Both options are completely acceptable in this show.

*Company* is credited with being the musical with the first non-linear plotline. Because of this, some might find this show problematic, but it is not. You have one main character, Robert, who has one stance on marriage: it is not for him. But we see through a series of scenes and songs, Robert picks up information about relationships from all of his friends. This eventually culminates in the song, “Being Alive,” where Robert proclaims he is ready to be loved. It can be endlessly debated on the order of each of these scenes, but we may never be sure. The more you delve into it, the musical feels like Robert’s stream of consciousness as he comes home from a day of work on his thirty-fifth birthday, as the plot comes back to his thirty-fifth birthday three separate times throughout the musical. Sondheim describes the plot of *Company* quite simply, actually: “A man with no emotional commitments reassesses his life on his thirty-fifth birthday by reviewing his relationships with his married acquaintances and his girlfriends. That is the entire plot.” (Sondheim, *Finishing* 165)

The layout of the show actually proved extremely helpful for my musical theatre class rehearsal process. Because the show is broken up into small scenes, it was easy to rehearse each scene for a day or two. I would work with those couple of students, while the others learned music or worked on competition pieces, then move onto the next scene after that. For the most part, students only really needed to focus on their one scene, as that was where their character’s relationship was established.

After discussing this production with my former students, I realized we had analyzed the script during the year before producing it, but never during the *Company* rehearsal process. This

is one thing I greatly regret. Although a number of students were in the class both years, it is different studying and discussing a show as you are about to act or direct it. I definitely wish I had taken the time to sit and reread it with the students before we jumped into rehearsing. This would have given all the actors insight into how their characters fit into the big picture of the musical. It was not as dire for the couples, as it was for the actor playing Robert. This additional reading would have given him a lot more to think about in terms of character, relationship, and the story as a whole. It would have gotten everyone more invested and on the same page. This may have also diminished some of the negative feelings backstage. When creating the rehearsal schedule, I was more concerned with time, but it definitely would have been beneficial for the current cast to read and discuss it, as I know we all would have gotten something out of it.

*Company* is a musical I thoroughly enjoy studying and my students felt similarly. If they had not been interested in the piece, I would not have bothered directing it. I am very glad I tested the material on my students prior to choosing to produce it. I have continued to do this season after season with my students and have found this to be incredibly enlightening. They bring up things I had not even thought about. I also am very grateful that my administration trusted me to direct this piece. I found *Company* to be an extremely rewarding experience, as did my students.

## CHAPTER 6: *MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG*

*Merrily We Roll Along* is indeed a flawed show, so why do it? This answer is going to be different for everyone, whether it be Sondheim's notable songs from the score, the challenging book, the backwards narrative, or the need to "get it right." A number of *Merrily We Roll Along* songs have been featured in Sondheim's revues like, "Not a Day Goes By," "Opening Doors," and "Good Thing Going." I first learned about *Merrily We Roll Along* when I attempted an audition with the song, "Franklin Shepard, Inc." to no avail. And though this experience could have tainted the show for me, it has stuck with me since then. The cast recording always has intrigued and interested me. The reverse-chronological script also draws many to this show. There are not many shows that attempt something like this, as it can cause a number of challenges and confusion. Costuming has to figure out how to make characters look older, and then younger as the show progresses. Actors may also have a hard time with a reverse-character arc. Many have also been drawn to revive this piece in an attempt to "get it right." Throughout the years, each subsequent revival production has had adjustments to the book, the music, the lyrics, the characters, everything in an attempt to make the piece a little better.

Why would a high school theatre teacher attempt this show? My answer is once again passion. Deciding on the main Spring musical for our 2018-2019 season was a bit trivial. We had several strong guys who had good voices, were great actors, and could move well. My girls were also movers, good singers, and good actors. Nothing was really exciting my production team, so I took to the students, which is not abnormal for me. In casual conversation, I often enjoy asking upperclassmen what shows they would be interested in doing for the next season. Unfortunately, it is not often a fruitful conversation with fantastical productions of *Wicked* or

*Book of Mormon*, shows we could not and would not do. In my Advanced Theatre class, we usually spend the final month of the school year reading and dissecting plays and musicals, and that year we had read *Merrily We Roll Along*. This was the same year my students had produced *Company*, so they were on a Sondheim kick and enjoyed researching the time period, connecting the plot lines from scene to scene, as well as making observations about similarities between *Company* and *Merrily We Roll Along*. I had tossed around the idea of directing *Merrily We Roll Along* but thought it better for a musical theatre class musical because of its obscure nature and was less likely to draw a crowd. However, *Merrily We Roll Along* also was going to require more sets than we usually build for the musical theatre class musical, since there are so many specific and different locations. However, my students expressed a great deal of interest in the piece when reading it, so I kept it in the corner of my mind. It was soon getting close to the end of the school year and I still had not chosen next year's musical. I decided to make this a teaching opportunity. I told my Advanced Theatre class that they were going to be producers for the day. We were going to weigh out options for our school's main spring musical for the next season. We chose a number of different musicals including *Merrily We Roll Along*, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, *Sweeney Todd*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, as well as a couple others. We discussed the casting requirements, cast size, technical requirements, dance necessities, and any other challenges. This initiated some interesting conversations and got them thinking not about their personal role in a musical, but how musical selection affects our department as a whole, and if this department is capable of fulfilling the necessities of a given musical. With the musicals we deemed feasible, I asked each student to rate their top three, out of my own curiosity. I thought *Sweeney Todd* would be higher on their lists, but *Merrily We Roll Along* was on top of almost everyone's list. The musical really interested them. I knew I loved



it, but I once again was surprised my high school students' connection with it. I do not think all high school students always connect with Sondheim's works, but I have been lucky enough to have students that do. If you do as well, I say go for it. After they began to notice they all had a common passion for *Merrily We Roll Along*, the students took to convincing our technical director. I did nothing to initiate this conversation, but after they had made their pitch to her, my technical director and I were astounded by the students' overwhelming passion for the piece. We discussed the pros and cons of doing the piece, as well as the logistics, and it was a done deal. My passion, in combination with my students' passion, for *Merrily We Roll Along* had led us to tackle another Sondheim piece.

Pitching this show to my principal did not require much. We were sure to mention the adult relationships and infidelity, as well as the alcohol use, but we were sure to compare *Merrily We Roll Along* with *Company* and *Into the Woods*. *Merrily We Roll Along* definitely was not pushing past any previously set content-boundaries. Our principal was comfortable with this show knowing we had not received complaints doing shows with similar themes and content.

Before choosing this show, it is important to make sure you have several options for the six main characters: Frank, Charley, Mary, Beth, Gussie, and Joe. Frank, Charley, and Mary do the majority of the singing and carry most of the scenes, so they should take priority in casting. Frank is your leading man. He is charming, a guy's guy, sweet, and sincere. He sings a lot, and fairly high for a tenor, going up to a Bb4. He also has a very dynamic acting range. He has sweet moments when he gets married, and really dark moments, like when he is getting divorced. This actor really needs to be able to play the gamut.

Charley is fairly different because he is more of a comedic sidekick type. He has somewhat less stage time than Frank, but still sings quite a bit. However, he is the character

making the jokes, acting awkward, lightening the mood. Also a tenor, Charley's range is only slightly lower than Frank's, topping out at an Ab<sup>4</sup>. Charley sings two noteworthy songs in the show, those being, "Franklin Shepard, Inc." and "Good Thing Going." We were sure to have the gentlemen sing both of those songs for callbacks. "Franklin Shepard, Inc." is a very fast and challenging patter song, which requires a lot of skill, and may be the most challenging song in the show. "Good Thing Going" is a very simple song, but tells a moving story, similar to that of Frank and Charley, so we definitely wanted to assure the actor could sing this song as well as act it.

When casting Frank and Charley, it really ended up coming down to type. I wanted to push against type and make our usual lovable goofball actor Frank and make our typical leading man Charley or Joe. But what it came down to was a reading of the end of Act One, Scene Two, which is the end of Frank and Charley's friendship. There was so much bitterness, disdain, and hurt in that callback scene and it solidified my choice to stick with my typical leading man as Frank, and my lovable goofball as Charley. I wanted to see them as other roles because I wanted to be able to challenge them in something outside their normal acting type, but it would have been a struggle for all of us, and they received the roles they were meant to have.

Mary was a bit difficult to cast, as she has a full, mature voice. A lot of our senior girls who lacked vocal training thought their seniority would be enough to land them the role of Mary; however, their lack of training showed during vocal callbacks. Mary also is rather challenging because she begins the show as a fat, washed up alcoholic. Throughout the show, we see Mary's journey to alcoholism, but backwards. She ends the show as a bright, optimistic, young writer-to-be. All three of these roles are challenging, due to their drastic character arc, but Mary has one of the most dramatic flips from naive to jaded. Alcoholic Mary is actually quite reminiscent

of *Company*'s Joanne. After hearing Mary's solo in "Now You Know," the vocal capabilities of the actresses called back made our decision much easier. And not so ironically, our Joanne from *Company* was cast as Mary. We knew she could play old and jaded.

The chemistry between Frank, Charley, and Mary definitely is important to observe. They spend the entire show together and need to appear to be close friends of many years. In most productions of any show, all the time these actors spend together in rehearsals should help facilitate this bond. They also are in a number of scenes with just the three of them, which can often create a small, intimate rehearsal. These rehearsals can usually be a lot of fun, dependent on the subject matter. The two gentlemen cast as Frank and Charley had gone to school together for a number of years and were in the same grade, so they knew each other very well. The bond was basically already there. However, the actress cast as Mary was a bit of an introvert, so while the boys were fast friends, it was a little more difficult to create the bond with Mary. If I were to do this again, I would think of some activities I could facilitate with just the three of them to help them create a bond. Team building and trust activities would be helpful. If I was able to be picky, I would have used the beginning of Act One, Scene Three, which is the first time we see the three friends' dynamic in the show, in callbacks to test the bond between the three actors. However, the role of Mary was chosen more through vocal callbacks. The actress cast as Mary did mention this show forced her to be more extroverted. She was forced to bond with these guys, and she got to a good friendship with them onstage. However, I wonder what the show would have been had I begun the rehearsal process with three already-tight friends. I likely would have been able to build on a previously-established friendship.

We do not meet Beth until the end of Act One, and her only solo is "Not a Day Goes By," so that was the obvious callback choice. The challenge with Beth was finding an actress who

could sing the role as well as act it. Her solo is meant to be gut-wrenching, and we found that most of our high school students had a lot of trouble connecting with the character's feelings as she was going through a divorce. Obviously, none of our students have gone through a divorce, but I would push them to connect with times they had felt loss or betrayal. The actress we ended up choosing for Beth had lost her mom, so I attempted to lead her to think about times that she had faced a loss. However, this was not information the actress personally had shared with me, so I found it difficult to broach the topic. We instead talked about Beth's day-to-day feelings and how she gets through her day and copes with these feelings. This helped the actress, as it did not seem the actress was ready to interact with her feelings of personal loss. This is completely okay. You have to walk a fine line with high school students, as they are still learning to interact with their emotions. If I were to open that conversation and the actress was not ready to, I would have done irreparable damage to our relationship and the actress might have a hard time coming back to and performing this song.

The struggle with casting Gussie was her command for any and every situation. We needed an actress with a strong belt, which we had. But the deciding factor was which actress was going to be able to seduce Frank. Gussie knows what she wants and is not afraid to do whatever it takes to get it. Seniority is rarely a factor in casting in our department and it just so happened that a freshman was the young lady right to play Gussie, so she got the role.

Casting Joe is a little easier. He does not have a solo song; he has a couple of solo lines in "Now You Know" and "It's a Hit!" and speak-sings in "Opening Doors." So, you just need a strong actor who can carry a tune and is not going to struggle through Sondheim's rhythms. In our production, Joe ended up being the actor called back for Frank and Charley, who was not right for either of those roles but was still a strong performer.

There are several other supporting roles that have speaking and singing lines, which was a great opportunity to feature our students who were called back but did not receive one of the main six characters. There also are seven transitions throughout the show sung by a number of different actors. They are there for set and costume changes, so you cannot often use your main six characters. These provide a great opportunity to feature your entire ensemble. It can be challenging making sure they all have a microphone on, but if you can get past this challenge, every actor has a chance to have a line or two.

It is not often that casting drama gets back to me, but it was bad with this show, and is likely why it did. I had about three or four seniors who really thought they deserved certain roles, which they did not receive. Well, they got together when the cast list was posted and griped about anything and everything they possibly could, but then this negativity made its way into school. I do not care if you are going to smear my name, I get it. Everyone has an opinion on who should get what role, and I think this might have been the root of my problem. I had made a decision prior to *Merrily We Roll Along* callbacks: we were going to have open callbacks where everyone was allowed to stay in the room and watch any and all callbacks they liked. All actors and stage management were there to see all callbacks, so they were gradually forming their opinions and building their case on who was best for each role. And, of course, the person best for each role was always going to be their friends. It is very difficult for high school students to remove their bias toward their friends and actually see who sang a song the best, who was more in tune with the scene, etc. They always want to see the best in their friends, which is great but not always realistic. These students also had a hard time conceiving someone else might be better than themselves. Their mentality was no one could be better than them, especially not an underclassman. What baffles me is each of these students had a leading role in

a previous production earlier in the year, all of them. Yet, they still felt they deserved one of these roles in this show. With the exception of one, none of these students were in voice lessons either, and the people who received the roles had. I wish students understood they are not likely to receive a leading role if they do not put in the work. You do not just receive roles because you are a senior. You have to work and become a better performer. Then, you might get the role you want. I also believe when students get roles, they think they are automatically right for every role. These students who had received roles earlier in the year, or in previous years, were right for those roles at the time. They were not right for these roles in this show, and it is difficult for high school students to comprehend this. I even had one of these students quit the show. He did not think this was going to be worth his time and cited that he needed to think about college and get a job. Part of this was likely his hurt, but this student's parents also had a hard time putting value in any role but the lead role. So, I am sure they were encouraging him to quit, due to the size of his supporting role. I warned this student he would regret this decision. He had been involved in almost every production since his sophomore year and he was going to quit the last one. Not to mention, all his friends were in the show. There definitely was going to be major fear of missing out. His mind was made up and he quit. And as I predicted, when all his friends were in rehearsal and he was not, when he hated his job, two weeks later he asked if he could come back. I still had not filled his role, in hopes he would come back, so I put him back in the show. I did not want him to miss this opportunity or his last high school musical.

Since this process, I now close my callbacks. The only people in the room are the actors who are about to perform, the directors, and one stage manager, as needed. Also, I am always open to giving audition feedback, and these students likely needed some feedback. However, I adopted one of my UCF professor's policies after this event and said I would not be giving

audition feedback until three weeks after the cast list was posted. It makes sense: I was going to have these four performers at my door with their sassy speeches ready for me on Monday morning. At the time, they were going to be there to tear me down, rather than actually get feedback. If you actually want feedback, and want to grow from this feedback, you will wait, and you will ask for it. No one ended up asking for feedback, and it is okay. It obviously was not important enough to them.

We began our rehearsal process with about two weeks of table work, as I felt it necessary with such an intricate book and plot. We began by reading the script chronologically. We made observances about how the plot was progressing. We created a big timeline on paper, and, after each scene, we would stop and discuss what had happened in that scene, but also what had happened between each scene, as a lot of events occur in between scenes and are merely mentioned in the next scene. Because the action in the musical travels backwards, it is often difficult to comprehend what is happening when. So, it was important we read the script chronologically first, so we could all pinpoint the action as you would normally read a chronological script. This helped us see the plot from the characters' perspectives. We then read the script as written and noticed how it flowed. I made sure to note prior to reading this way, we should throw out everything we know already and look at the script with fresh eyes. This was how a typical audience would view the show. They would not know everything to come, and it is important also to see the show as the audience does. It helped us to understand what information the audience learns and when they make those connections. It also instructed us as to what information needed to be highlighted and when, to help the audience understand the story, as it can be quite confusing. During this time, we also looked up all historical references.

Because this story is set from 1957 to 1976, it was important to note what was going on in the world at the time.

We then proceeded to block and rehearse the show chronologically. This definitely assisted the students with each character's growth and change throughout the play. We were rehearsing everything as we normally do, but it got to a point about a month out from the show where I felt like we were way behind and ended up having to extend rehearsal times. My intention was to rehearse the show chronologically, run it all chronologically once or twice, then switch to show order and rehearse the rest of the show as written. We were able to block and rehearse each scene chronologically but never run the entire act together chronologically. I think this was a greatly missed opportunity, as it would have really helped the students get a sense of the rise and fall of their friendships and success. The students have mentioned they believe they would have gotten a lot out of running the show as a whole chronologically. But, we may have spent too much time really working through these characters and these scenes. There is just a lot of material, and a lot of really great discussions came from it, but we needed to be a little more diligent during our rehearsal time. It is a fairly straightforward show with not a lot of dancing, so I thought it would go rather quickly, but in the end it did not. This is the show where I really noticed how much time is lost for the musical theatre class musical, as we take a two-week hiatus out of main Spring musical rehearsal to tech and perform the musical theatre class musical. Also, the week we come back from that hiatus often ends up being a lot of review, making sure everyone remembers what we did before the two-week hiatus.

I have three young choreographers who are very skilled with dance, so I allowed them to choreograph parts of this show. I find it important to foster their art wherever possible. There is not a big call for dance in this show, but whenever we found an opportunity, we took it. I



choreographed some simple movement and walking patterns for the opening, “Merrily We Roll Along,” which transitioned immediately into a big party for “That Frank.” The choreographers knew the skill level of their fellow classmates and were able to choreograph to their strengths. The challenge with “That Frank” was they were at a party drinking and had to dance with said glasses. Because I had recently used real glassware in *Company*, I originally thought I would be able to use it again for *Merrily We Roll Along*. I soon came to my senses and realized in *Company* that the audience was close up, so it was important to use actual glassware, but the actors were not dancing with these glasses. For *Merrily We Roll Along*, I foresaw a lot of casualties in our future, and because the audience was further away, they were likely not to be able to recognize the difference. However, with so many students holding glassware, it became clear very quickly they were not used to holding alcoholic beverages, as these glasses were all very foreign in their hands. I wish we had had time to run “That Frank” with liquid in their glasses, as I imagine the cast would realize quite quickly they needed to hold their glasses a little differently and a lot more carefully.

We also added choreography to “Now You Know,” “The Blob,” and “Bobby and Jackie and Jack.” It was important to me to add choreography to the latter because the piece is a bit dated. “Bobby and Jackie and Jack” is a song from Frank and Charley’s unfinished political show, *Take a Left*. We see the song presented in a revue of their work, *Frankly Frank*. The song pokes fun at the Kennedys: what they did in office, how many of them there are, political dealings, etc. It is a light-hearted song that was likely to be quite humorous in 1981. During our table work, we were sure to research the people being talked about in this song, the time period, etc. as I wanted to make sure the students knew what and who they were singing about. Unfortunately, the people to whom these jokes would have been funny are not often coming to

see high school musicals, and if they are, they are likely to be the grandparent of one of the students in the production. The number is dated and did not garner many laughs amongst my students. I made sure to add something visually appealing to give the audience a laugh. I asked my student choreographer to make something playful and silly of the choreography, and I also gave the actors the license to be as goofy with this number as possibly. This song has always seemed so out of place in this show, stops the flow of the story, as well as being dated. So, we did our best to make it through the number by adding as many comedic bits as we could.

The transitions also were given some minimal staging, walking patterns, and minimal choreography. The transitions are there for set and costume changes, while also giving the ensemble a feature. Some set changes were larger than others, but we had to create movement that would distract from the set change going on. Because there are seven different transitions, it became a huge headache very quickly. I wanted each of them to be different, so trying to keep each one fresh became trivial. It was also difficult to keep track of who was singing what, who was moving furniture, who was changing, etc. “Transition 5” sticks out in my head as being particularly problematic because we were transitioning from a party at Joe’s and Gussie’s brownstone apartment and moving to The Downtown Club. So, we had to get all the party furniture off the stage, as well as the grand piano, and then bring on six small café tables with two chairs each. If you are doing the show with full furniture, this is likely the same furniture you will have to move during this transition. I recall one rehearsal where we just ran transitions over and over and “Transition 5” definitely was run *multiple* times.

The music in *Merrily We Roll Along* is the least challenging of the three Sondheim shows I have directed. One of the main reasons is *Merrily We Roll Along* is written with an ensemble. In both *Into the Woods* and *Company*, there is no ensemble, so for several songs, you may have

one or two people written to sing a certain vocal part. Whereas with *Merrily We Roll Along*, it is written for an ensemble, and the ensemble music is not as intricate as these other shows. I have to wonder if the ensemble music is less challenging because it was originally written for young performers. Our ensemble did struggle with keeping all seven of the transitions straight, as they are all variations of the opening, “Merrily We Roll Along.” Going into it, both the music director and I thought if they knew the opening, they should be able to pick up the transitions easily. Unfortunately, many of our students failed to put in the time to learn the transitions. It took them a while to sit down and figure out which transitions each of them was in and what they sang in each. The transitions are all very simple and short; the students just needed to put in the time to learn them.

Songs that did give the students some musical challenges were “It’s a Hit!” and “Opening Doors.” Both were difficult because of the rhythms and entrances. “It’s a Hit!” was difficult because of the layering of different characters’ lines. All five characters were singing something different on top of the others. “Opening Doors” has a lot of quick entrances, and it is broken up into three different sections that all sound the same. So, while the actors think they have the rhythms and lines correct, they can often confuse them with one of the other verses. This song also adds the difficulty of typewriter and piano sounds. Throughout the song, Charley and Mary are each typing on their respective typewriters, crossing things out, rolling the carriage, while Frank is playing piano, writing down notes, and humming. It is masterful writing but can be quite a challenge. Sondheim creates a similar effect with a rolling pin and dough in *Sweeney Todd*’s “The Worst Pies in London.” My advice is to get the typewriters early, so the actors can practice with them early. Also, have these pieces be the ones they learn earlier in the rehearsal

process so they have more time to work on them. They should also take it nice and slow before moving up to show tempo.

One of Sondheim's most challenging pieces is "Franklin Shepard, Inc." The quick tempo, the chromatics, and the energy the actor has to put into this song are a lot to digest. This should be the first song Charley learns so he has the entire rehearsal process to perfect it. As always, start with the music and rhythms before you even think about blocking this song. Charley really needs time to take this song slowly at first. Chunking this song is helpful as well. It already is broken into chunks that are separated by small bits of dialogue, so instruct your actor to learn and memorize the song chunk by chunk. Some actors work differently, and the movements may help them to memorize the lines. However, you need to need to get the actor off book before you even begin to give him movement. It is a layering affect. The movement of the song really needs to build in intensity as Charley gets more and more into his storytelling and more impassioned about his topic. Also, this is a song you cannot fake your way through. You need an actor who is going to fully commit to making this song the best it can be. It is too good not to. There was a point shortly after we had blocked the song, and we were doing a run that included this song. My actor gave a mediocre performance. It was a dad moment, where I was not mad, I was just disappointed. I knew this actor was capable of *so* much more. I knew he was going to regret not putting 150% into this song. This song is a showstopper when done well, and this student was completely capable of pulling that off, so I told him just that. Fortunately, this is exactly what he needed to hear. Any time he was offstage, I would see him in the house running the song with headphones in, holding a phone up to his ear, looking like a crazy person. He put in the work and the song stopped the show and won him an Applause Award for Outstanding Lead Actor.

Frank's son, Frank Jr., is a character in this show. This can be an oversight when choosing this musical. Do not let yourself be surprised when you choose this musical and then realize you need to cast a child as well. This was my first time working with a child actor, and it went rather smoothly. The most difficult part of working with a child in this show was just finding the child. We do not have a strong connection to our feeder middle schools, so I did not feel as though I could readily call on them for assistance. Our technical director has a son, who was seven at the time, and though he initially expressed interest, he was too nervous to take on the part. It was coming close to the show, and I knew the actor playing Frank had a younger brother in fifth grade. We asked him to play the role, and he was, of course, excited to be in a show with his big brother. The role is minimal, but it is in the script. Frank Jr. has too short scenes, and just like the 2012 Encores! New York City Center production, we also gave him a couple lines in "Transition 3." It is written in the script that he sings in the final transition, "Transition 7," which might have worked. You do not see Frank Jr. for all of Act Two; it might have been a nice time to feature him, but I liked him singing "Transition 3" instead.

Frank gets a tough break in *Merrily We Roll Along*. When we start the show, he is on his knees in turmoil. He is then haunted by figures of his past, before jumping into a big party to celebrate the opening of a movie he has produced. At this party, we find out he is cheating on his wife. I have learned through Sondheim's musicals that people are not readily going to forgive infidelities. They do not in *Into the Woods*, and they do not in *Merrily We Roll Along*. So, the audience begins to fall in love with this debonair protagonist, only to find out he is cheating. It takes the audience a lot of time to get him back on his side. We then meet Charley in Act One, Scene Two, who is silly and sassy, so we like him. He has been hurt by Frank, so we again have reason to dislike Frank. Frank is also late, so there are already three strikes

against Frank. At the top of Act One, Scene Three, we get to see Frank interact with Frank Jr., which is charming, so he gains some points back. But, it is not until the end of Act One, Scene Three that Frank gets a solo, a moment alone with his thoughts at the piano. He sings, “Growing Up,” where he is conflicted about staying true to his old friends or growing up and working toward his own dreams. It is a really tender, heartfelt look at Frank, unfortunately coming about 45-50 minutes into the musical, which is just too late. This is something both I and my young actor were completely aware of, but unfortunately could do little about. The actor was really a nice, charismatic guy, and it shows when he performs onstage, but he had so much working against him, I am not sure the audience ever really attached to him.

There are a number of things I wish I had done during this rehearsal process. Several of these things I did not get to do because of our time restraint, and others are things I have come up with in discussions about the show and process. I mentioned earlier that I would do more to build chemistry between the main three characters. I sometimes take chemistry for granted among my actors. I think I could have also spent more time working on physicality. This musical spans nearly 20 years, and the body is likely to change drastically during that time. I would suggest exploring how these characters move at each age, but specifically at age 20 versus 30 versus 40. Then, your actors will be able to check in sporadically during the show with each physicality. In my post-show discussion with the actor who played Charley, he said he often found times in the middle of the show where he would have to stop and remember what scene he was about to go into, his feelings toward the other characters, how old he was, etc. I realized, maybe taking the time to write down some notes about each scene, your character’s age, how your character was feeling about certain characters as you entered the scene, might have been helpful during rehearsals, and perhaps even the show. This would give the actors a quick

reference before entering a scene and allow them to remember what has happened to them before this scene began. This confusion is another result of the reverse-chronological storytelling.

One thing working against the original Broadway production was all the actors cast were high school age or just a little older. When one spends the money to see a Broadway production, they expect to see actors who can believably play these roles and tell this story. And while they may have been close to Frank's, Charley's, and Mary's starting ages of 20, they were nowhere near 40, and a Broadway audience would find this hard to digest. Remember too, we first meet these characters at 40. We do not meet them at 20 and then watch them grow up. If we had, the audience may have been more on board. What is odd is this same factor may have helped our production to succeed. Our patrons are not paying Broadway prices to come see our shows, and they know they are coming to see high school students perform a high school musical. They already know what to expect. They know characters of all ages are going to be performed by actors aged 14 to 18. They walk in already having to suspend their disbelief. They know they are going to have to believe whatever age these characters say they are. I fear this was a major point of the demise of this musical. If they had cast actors who were 30 years old, then the costumers and makeup artists would not have had to work as hard to get the audience to believe these actors were at the most ten years older or younger than their actual ages.

Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince chose to cast such young actors in an effort to highlight the wonder and amazement one has when they are 20 years old and about to embark on the world, but how we become old, bitter, and jaded throughout our life. A parent shared this feeling with me one night after the show. He came up to me and pointed out how sad this story really was. Frank begins his career with these amazing friends, but through his journey to success, he loses them. It is lonely at the top. And there we were, watching these high school

students produce a show, as they too were about to embark on their careers, full of hope and wonder. Something special hit me that night, both happy and sad. It is my wish my students continue to have such hope and wonder. But, in a way, we all eventually wake up to the realities of life.



## CHAPTER 7: SUGGESTIONS

If you are thinking of directing a Stephen Sondheim show, there are a lot of different variables to think about, but the first thing to consider is student buy-in. In my experience, you are going to have a tough time with any show, Sondheim or not, if your students are not invested in this production. Specifically, because Sondheim's shows require more time in music rehearsals, as well as in-depth character analysis, you need to know your students are going to be willing to put in the extra time. My students were invested in these productions, so they spent the outside rehearsal time drilling music and doing detailed character study for these shows. They asked for extra rehearsals to sit and talk about character and relationships. In post-discussion with my students about these shows, one thing they consistently said was they needed discussion and table work time. Those discussions about breaking down the plot and intentions are what really helped them through the rehearsal process. I also make sure to create a rehearsal environment where everyone feels welcome to ask questions, any question. This is important because there is so much material and phrasing we either do not use anymore or is a little older than their experience. Having a student dramaturg would be an amazing job for someone interested in researching all these things. A colleague of mine also suggested having an ongoing document where everyone could type the words and phrases they do not know, then also give a definition of them, so everyone is all the more knowledgeable. This is the sort of thing students are going to be willing to work on, if they are invested in the show.

I highly suggest reading these musicals with your students prior to selecting them. They are a terrific sounding board, as you can tell which shows they liked or not. High school students are not often shy about giving their opinions. It is quite interesting to see which characters they

gravitate toward, what they think about the language, themes, setting, etc. I like to make sure we discuss all aspects of the script to get them dissecting it as much as possible. Reading these shows in class also helps to build hype around them. I usually only read these scripts in my advanced classes of about 15 students, but once we read these scripts, these students would research the show on their own, then they would tell their friends about it, and their friends would look them up and tell their friends, etc. But you can really get a grasp of what shows they are fond of. The discussions had amongst my classes while reading these scripts was always so insightful and often aided my decision-making process.

These in-class discussion also gave my students a feeling of ownership over these scripts. Those first 15 students to read it felt a sense of pride being the first in our department to read it, analyze it, and know about this show. It sounds reductive, but there is something about being the first to know about a show amongst your friends. There is a sense of pride because they know this show and have analyzed this show in class. If this is the show chosen as the main Spring musical, they knew about it first, so they feel pride in the production of this musical and feel ownership in the success of this show. They are invested and help get others invested in it as well.

Unfortunately, in my experience, these titles are not bringing in crowds. While Sondheim shows are beloved amongst “theatre people,” they are not amongst high school audiences. I have felt buzz around the school when we produced *Chicago* and *Bring It On*, as these were musicals attached to movies, so people knew about them. These shows got people excited about them and brought in crowds. Out of the three shows I have directed, *Into the Woods* has the most notoriety. At the time, I thought everyone knew *Into the Woods* and they would be coming out in droves. This was one of the lowest attended shows we have done. And

while there are a number of factors going into audience attendance, the title definitely has something to do with it. Another factor against our *Into the Woods* attendance was the small cast. *Into the Woods* is one of the smallest casts we have had, and it is a proven fact the more cast members you have, the more people will come. We also produced *Into the Woods* prior to the release of the 2014 film, though if we had produced it afterward, I know we would have been better attended. I am not sure how much more, but a feature film brings notoriety, which brings a larger audience. At my school we have also read *Into the Woods* with every Theatre 1 class for the last nine years, so I am interested to see if this affects attendance when we produce *Into the Woods* again. Because *Company* was in our black box/thrust setup with only 98 seats, we sold out every night. However, I am sure we merely sold out three nights because of the number of students in the show and the limited number of seats. If we had unlimited seating, I am not sure we would have been much more successful. I knew *Merrily We Roll Along* was not going to bring in a crowd, and it did not. Even for “Theatre People,” it is an obscure musical. We had decent-sized audiences but nothing stellar.

High school theatre is not about attendance. It is about what students are gaining from producing a given piece of theatre. When I first began teaching and was building my program, it was important to produce shows likely to draw an audience. I was trying to build a name for my program, as well as myself, while also trying to save money for future shows. Since then, I have done so, and I am able to produce shows without having to worry about how many people will come. I knew prior to producing *Merrily We Roll Along*, it was not going to sell an exorbitant number of seats. It just is not a title people know. I was not doing *Merrily We Roll Along* to sell tickets; I was doing it to give my students the challenge of this show. This was a show my students were excited about, so we did it. We all learned a lot, which I see as a success. We

knew we needed to be somewhat frugal with our budget, as we expected low attendance, and we ended up coming out making money. So, overall it was a win-win situation.

Also, Sondheim has so many more shows than this. *Into the Woods* is the musical I see produced most in high schools, which garners my highest recommendation for production. *West Side Story* is produced frequently as well, by schools with a large number of boys. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is a lot of fun and very silly, though sexual. The cast is also rather small and there are not many female roles: Philia and Domina are the only two female roles who sing, as all the courtesans in the house of Lycus are merely dancers. *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is fairly popular, if you can get principal approval for all the gore and violence. I recall seeing a gorgeous production of *Sunday in the Park with George* at the Florida State Thespian Festival several years ago. It has a lot of roles and does not require a lot of choreography, though the technical needs are fairly demanding. I would highly recommend staying away from *Assassins* with our current political climate. I have studied it with my advanced students twice, and both times were extremely intrigued by it, but I cannot imagine any principal approving a piece about assassinating the president. If you can persuade your principal, I highly recommend *Company* if you have a Robert and Joanne, as the technical requirements are minimal. Though my students highly recommend *Into the Woods* and *Company*, *Merrily We Roll Along* gets mixed reviews. I am not sure if it was toxicity in our production, but some performers did not seem to enjoy participating in this production. In speaking with my actors who played Charley and Mary, they both recommend the show to other high schools to produce, though some of my dancers and student choreographers had a less gratifying time. It seems as though the main six characters had an interesting time with character exploration, but the students performing in the ensemble did not gain as much knowledge

through the *Merrily We Roll Along* rehearsal process, which I completely understand. Oddly enough, my technical students thoroughly enjoyed *Merrily We Roll Along*, though I have yet to put my finger on why. So out of the three shows I have directed, I do not recommend *Merrily We Roll Along* as highly as I do *Into the Woods* and *Company*.

Principal approval can be difficult for some schools and a breeze at others. When going into a meeting to pitch your shows to your principal, I find it best to be upfront and honest about anything you think may raise a red flag, like sexual content, alcohol, tobacco, or drug use. Also be ready for any question they might have. The more prepared you are, the more likely they are to approve your show. *Into the Woods* is the tamest of these three shows, but I was sure to highlight “Hello, Little Girl,” the death in Act Two, as well as the adultery between The Baker’s Wife and Cinderella’s Prince. I assured my principal we would not highlight the sexual nature of The Wolf. We also discussed the appropriate level of intimacy between The Baker’s Wife and Cinderella’s Prince: we would only kiss onstage and “everything else” would happen offstage. There was little to no discussion over the deaths, but I assured the principal they were integral to the plot and not at all gruesome.

When we produced *Company*, it was in our black box/thrust space, so we were able to assure our principal that it would not be more than 300 people seeing this show and it would mostly be an audience of parents and students who comprehend the piece. They would understand why we were doing the show, its instructional value, and appreciate it as art. We were sure to note the drinking, but noted it was merely social drinking at a party where no one would be getting heavily intoxicated. We noted Joanne’s tobacco use, as well as intimacy between Robert and April, and assured the principal it would be tasteful, and we would be

looking at the piece with our mom and dad eyes in an effort to keep it PG. With this conversation, we received the green light to produce it.

We appeared with a similar conversation when presenting *Merrily We Roll Along*, noting there was not more drinking, tobacco use, or intimacy than *Company*. Acknowledging this, the principal approved it. Knowing we were not stepping over previously set boundaries put our principal at ease. It makes sense: if we did not receive phone calls or emails from parents regarding one show, you should be fine with another. However, parents are always different year to year, and you never know how one might react, so it is always a risk for a principal. But thankfully, my principals have always supported me, my show choices, and our department.

However, not all principals are as willing to take this risk. Principals who are new to the job might be a lot more cautious about your show choice. Also, if a principal has received negative feedback before regarding a certain production, they could be apprehensive toward your next show choice. Before I began working at my current school, the instructor before me had produced some questionable productions, so parents and administration were not too pleased. When I began teaching, I received several comments and questions about my choice of productions. My first couple shows were fairly family-friendly and did not push the envelope at all. *Chicago* was my first main Spring musical to really push the boundaries, and we did not produce it until my fourth year with the school. It really is different from school to school, and it is important to have an open conversation with your principal about what they are comfortable with you performing onstage. I would much rather be up front about the content on my stage than get fired for it later because the principal did not know.

Once selecting your Sondheim musical, I would highly recommend setting out a thorough rehearsal schedule. We all know rehearsal schedules change, but you want to make

sure you give yourself enough time to work through these heavy scenes. Make sure you give yourself plenty of time to read and dissect the script as a cast, prior to blocking or music rehearsals. It is important everyone is on the same page from day one. When everyone understands their role in the show, everyone can better perform their role. In discussing with my music director of these shows, she highly suggests giving yourself more time than you think for music. Part of the challenge of these shows is the music and getting the music right is quite skillful and impressive. She suggests beginning with the harder pieces first, as it will give your actors plenty of time to get it right. My students were constantly drilling their music whenever they had down time. Because the music is so challenging, your students often will want to work it until they get it right. So, give them the tools and the time to do so. My music director also suggests when teaching, take your time and get it right the first time. There is nothing wrong with going slow. If you rush through teaching the music and a student learns it incorrectly, they will rehearse it incorrectly until someone notices it is incorrect. Then you will have to retrain them on this piece, which may or may not be engrained in their brain incorrectly at this point. It can cause a lot of problems. So, take your time and get it right the first time. As I previously mentioned, repetition is key. This is music students need to repeat over and over to instill it into their muscle memory. Breaking each song into chunks can be extremely helpful. Students can work on a song a chunk at a time; when they perfect one chunk, move onto the next; when they get the second chunk, put the first two together, then perfect the third, and put those three together, etc. Compartmentalizing makes the song a lot more attainable and does not seem as cumbersome. There are a number of songs where the verses all sound the same, like *Company*'s "Someone is Waiting," or songs with several reprises all sounding very similar with minor variations. Make sure to figure out some way to separate the verses and to remember which

version of the song is which. My music director was always sure to point out the differences in each version of the song, as well as give a reason as to why this version of the song might be different. In *Company*, the “Bobby’s” come back time and time again. She noted that the first set of “Bobby’s” during the overture are haunting, while also slow, because Bobby has not begun his journey into exploring relationships, where the set of “Bobby’s” prior to “Being Alive” are extremely dissonant and feel like an attack on Robert because he is finally having his revelation about relationships. The music is so important in these shows, so make sure to do it right.

Because the music in these shows is so important, it is integral you have a knowledgeable music director. Thankfully, for these three shows, I have had a music director who knows the musical theatre canon and is very well-versed in Sondheim’s works. It helped greatly the music director was the chorus director at my school, because they knew the skills the actors were working on in class and were able to make connections between class and rehearsal. I can only imagine the difficulty one would have if their music director was not fully onboard with the production or was less than familiar with Sondheim’s works. It would take a lot of time with the score to get comfortable with each of these pieces. So, make sure you get a music director you trust and is willing to put in the work to make this music sound as amazing as it should.

Also, these pieces are old. Do not be afraid to update them! It is always important to put your own touch on a show, and if it means modernizing or changing something about them, I say do it. Make sure the concept makes sense and still tells the story, but if it gives you the passion to produce one of these shows, try it. Stephen Sondheim himself has always reworked his pieces and is consistently a part of reimagining his works. Most recently, he assisted in reviving *Company* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Originally, *Company* was written and set in 1970, with dated references, like the use of an answering machine, among others. He has helped make



adjustments to the script and score, while also turning the main male protagonist, Robert, into a female, Bobbie. Without changing any dialogue, our production of *Company* was set current day and not 1970. We also took several liberties with the look of our production of *Into the Woods*. We did not do anything to change the time period with *Merrily We Roll Along*, as the time period is very specific for the show; however, we used a visual concept of black, white and shades of gray. The entire set was painted in gradients, and the entire ensemble was in black, while the main six characters were each given a certain color to wear in each scene. This assisted the audience with knowing who to focus on and helped them remember who each character was from scene to scene. Each of these musicals have been produced and revived and performed many times over, and every time with a new concept where something is completely different. I am so inspired every time I see something totally new done to these pieces.

Finally, these shows should not be scary. They are just like any other musical out there; they are just a little more advanced in material and music. Though I doubted it, my students were completely capable of taking on this material. Prior to directing them, I often wondered if they were skilled enough musically, if they would understand the material, or if they would like the material. They always were and they always did. Students are often more in tune with people and relationships than we give them credit for. And wherever they did lack in knowledge, I was always there to help fill in the blanks. These pieces can be intimidating for any director, but these are just like any other musical. You may have to put more time into script analysis and learning music than you would other musicals, but these musicals are so thought provoking, they will inspire you to want to study them more.

## **CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION**

The works of Stephen Sondheim are revered as some of the most difficult in all musical theatre. They are a challenge on multiple levels: the rhythms, the chromatics, the dissonances, the repetition, the melodic motifs, etc. The books written to accompany these scores are also incredibly deep and heart-wrenching stories. They are full of characters of all ages, all going through many difficult decisions in their lives. These all create a number of challenges for any performer, let alone a high school performer just beginning their musical theatre journey. Many believe these musicals are far too difficult for even an adult to master, so why would a high school theatre production ever think they could produce them successfully?

With a strong music director, my students were receptive to Sondheim's score. They were able to take the tools they were learning in their chorus classes and apply them to this score, to allow them to be successful with Sondheim's tricky music. They took the learning process slowly, tackling the difficult pieces first, and learning it correctly the first time. Students were driven to want to perfect these pieces and did so through rehearsal and repetition.

My students thrived when we would sit down and discuss a script. This was the basis for a successful rehearsal process. It became evident quite quickly, we all needed to sit down and read the script together. During this process, we would discuss the history of the production, the characters, time period, history, character arc, relationships, etc. This allowed our entire cast to begin on the same page, with the same background knowledge. Because these scripts can be so intellectual, it was my pleasure to guide my students through them, and they always enjoyed the journey and discussion.

I, too, often questioned whether high school students could pull off one of these pieces. Could high school students play characters double their age, with so much more life experience? My students consistently surprise me with what they know and what they can do. They understand relationships and what these characters are going through, as all these characters are relatable in some way or another. Some actors needed more insight than others, but it was all feasible.

When interviewing former students for this thesis, one of my final questions was, “Would you recommend another high school theatre program produce this show?” and the answer was always a resounding “Yes!” They did not even need to question. They all believed these shows were within their capabilities, as well as the capabilities of any other given high school student. They thrived on the challenge these pieces presented them. When I asked students who did several shows in their high school career, they all said there was something special about the Sondheim shows they did. Not to discount *James and the Giant Peach*, or whatever other musical you might be doing, but they got something more out of Sondheim’s shows. These shows challenged them unlike any other show they had done during high school. They felt a certain level of achievement for producing these works successfully. That alone makes these shows worth it, to me.

A close colleague of mine has always said, “If a show doesn’t scare you, it’s not worth doing,” which I wholeheartedly agree with. Producing one of Stephen Sondheim’s shows with high school students can seem like an incredibly daunting task, but they will be so worth it.

Stephen Sondheim’s shows are not easy, but as he once wrote, “Art isn’t easy.”  
(Sondheim, *Look* 37)

## REFERENCES

- “Alvin Theatre.” *Playbill Vault*, 1991-2020, [www.playbill.com/venue/alvin-theatre-vault-0000000032](http://www.playbill.com/venue/alvin-theatre-vault-0000000032). Accessed 25 February 2020.
- Brantley, Ben. "A Witch, a Wish and Fairy Tale Agony." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Aug 10, 2012, pp. 2. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1705719406?accountid=10003>.
- Markstein, Donald D. “Harold Teen.” *Toonopedia*, Tribune Media Services 2001-09, [www.toonopedia.com/teen.htm](http://www.toonopedia.com/teen.htm). Accessed 25 February 2020.
- Nadworny, Elissa. “The Most Popular High School Plays and Musicals.” *National Public Radio*, 31 July 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2019/07/31/427138970/the-most-popular-high-school-plays-and-musicals>.
- “Our History.” *Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre*, Regent’s Park Theatre Ltd. 2003-2020, <https://openairtheatre.com/history>. Accessed 26 February 2020.
- Six by Sondheim*. Directed by James Lapine, Home Box Office, Inc., 2014.
- Sondheim, Stephen, and George Furth. *Company*. Music Theatre International, 1996.
- Sondheim, Stephen, and George Furth. *Merrily We Roll Along*. Music Theatre International, 1994.
- Sondheim, Stephen, and James Lapine. *Into the Woods*. Music Theatre International, 1987.
- Sondheim, Stephen. *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981)*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.
- Sondheim, Stephen. *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011)*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.